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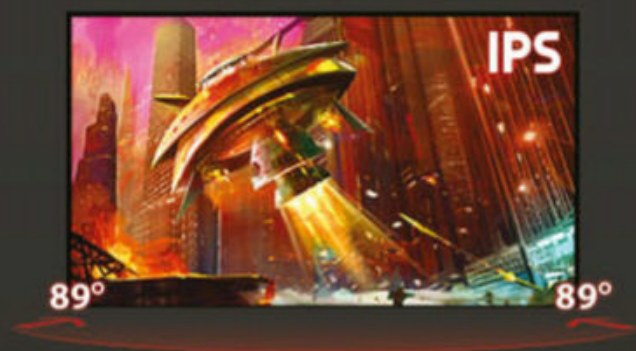
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ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Fake holidays

Twitter
[@robinlvalentine](https://twitter.com/robinlvalentine)

This month
Ran around in so many PC gaming worlds that he got a digital blister.

to lose yourself in and, for a while, forget the world. Almost our entire team has chipped in to share their favourite spaces, moments, and experiences exploring the virtual.

My hope is that it's as therapeutic to read as it was to put together.

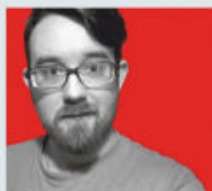
Robin

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PRINT EDITOR
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The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Non-mythical creatures

Twitter
[@FraserIBrown](https://twitter.com/FraserIBrown)

This month
Went to war for Troy – and discovered that a centaur isn't quite what he thought it was.



WES FENLON
Specialist in
Video meeting sass

Twitter
[@wesleyfenlon](https://twitter.com/wesleyfenlon)

This month
Chatted to devs working in lockdown – and demanded photos of their cutest pets.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Zen janitorial work

Twitter
[@rachel_watts](https://twitter.com/rachel_watts)

This month
Tried to convince us to play a game about cleaning train stations. See if she converts you.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
High altitude stubbornness

Twitter
[@Octaeder](https://twitter.com/Octaeder)

This month
Spent hours trying to run up sheer mountains. To prove some kind of point?

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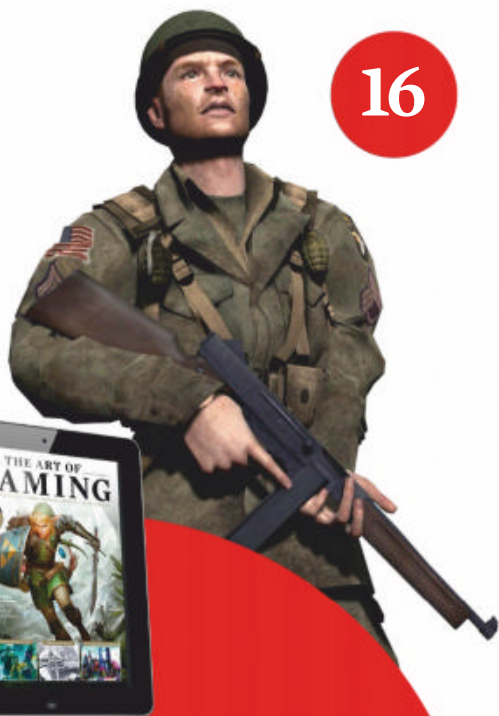
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EVERSPACE 2

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We do battle with centaurs (guys on horses), minotaurs (big guys), and cyclopes (other big guys).

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Infinity Ward says it's taking steps to reduce racist abuse in its games, *Modern Warfare* and *Warzone*.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

How the games industry has responded to the protests

Many developers and publishers have expressed their support for the Black Lives Matter movement this month, along with pledging donations to it, the NAACP, and other related causes. Events and announcements have also been moved back to draw attention to the protests that have been occurring in the US, as well as internationally.

On May 25, George Floyd died after police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Floyd's death, which was

recorded, sparked protests that spread across the US and beyond, with millions marching to demand an end to unjust, racist systems.

Within the games industry, EA was one of the first to address the protests – five days in – delaying a *Madden NFL 21* announcement to

**SOME GAME UPDATES
HAVE ALSO BEEN
DELAYED DUE TO THE
CIRCUMSTANCES**

instead make a statement about systemic racism.

“We stand with our African American/Black community of friends, players, colleagues and partners,” EA said. “Our immediate attention is on actions we can take to drive change against the unjust treatment and systemic bias that is plaguing the nation and our world.”

Following the Twitter statement, EA pledged \$1 million to organisations fighting for racial justice, starting with the Equal Justice Initiative and the NAACP legal Defense & Educational Fund. It is also matching donations made by its employees.

D'AWWW

WHOLESOME GAMES



The indie collective Wholesome Games hosted its first 'Wholesome Direct' livestream recently, showcasing a bunch of upcoming titles. Wholesome Games first started as a Twitter account and has since expanded into a community of developers who want to celebrate cute games. ■RW

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE 2



The Japanese MMO's western launch was a mess, mostly due to the continued suckiness of the Windows Store. It was so bad players took matters into their own hands, updating a custom launcher called *PSO2 Tweaker*, which lets people play without having to open the Windows Store at all. ■CL

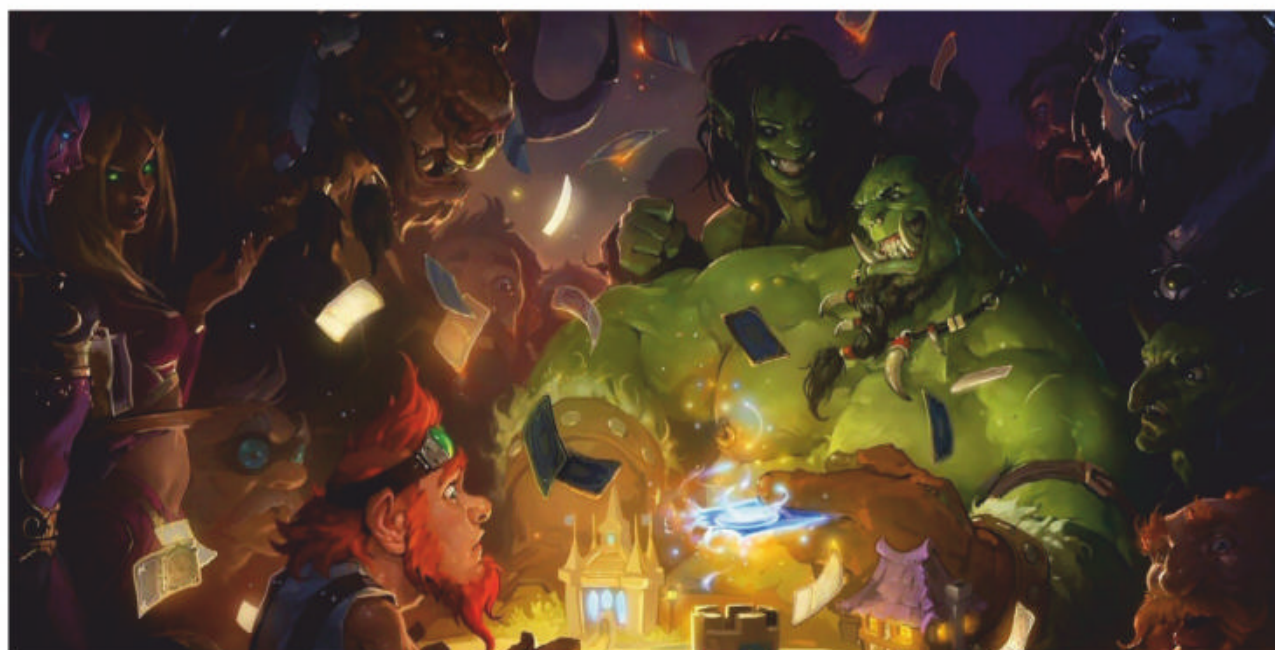


BIG HUGE NEWS

KINGDOMS OF AMALUR



The cult sort-of classic action-RPG – and prelude to an MMO that never was – *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* is getting a remaster from the same team that recently shined up *Darksiders*. I've got a real soft spot for *Reckoning* – both for its clever, reactive class system, and its weird world. ■RV



ABOVE, TOP: Last year Blizzard wasn't as supportive, suspending a protesting *Hearthstone* player.

ABOVE, BOTTOM LEFT: "This is bigger than a game, bigger than sports," said EA.

ABOVE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Indie devs, like Norwood Suite's Cosmo D, have been putting their games in Black Lives Matter bundles.

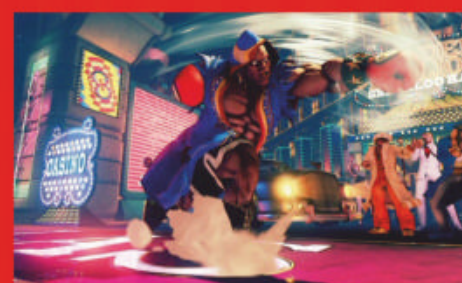
Other publishers, including Ubisoft, Devolver Digital and Square Enix have pledged donations, along with individual developers like thatgamecompany and Double Fine. Humble Bundle announced a \$1 million fund to help publish games from black developers, while itch is hosting a bundle where any developer can contribute, with the proceeds going to the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund and the Community Bail Fund.

Digital events and some game updates have also been delayed due to the circumstances. Epic Games recently pushed back *Fortnite Season 3* over what it called "recent events" but did not mention the protests, George Floyd, or any other actions it might be taking.

While some of the statements include a commitment to make significant changes internally, few have given any kind of specifics about what they're planning to do to combat racism or a lack of representation in their own organisations or games. And from some, the messages of solidarity are undermined by their recent or ongoing actions. Activision Blizzard said it supports "all those who stand against racism and inequality," but less than a year ago it suspended *Hearthstone* pro Ng 'blitzchung' Wai Chung when he made his own protest to call for Hong Kong's liberation.

Fraser Brown

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Street Fighter V

The *Street Fighter* subreddit raised \$15,000 with an impromptu Black Lives Matter online tournament.

Elite Dangerous

Next year's *Odyssey* expansion will finally let you get out of your ship and explore worlds on foot.

A Total War Saga: Troy

The mythological *Total War* spin-off will be free to keep for the first 24 hours after it launches.

BlizzCon

BlizzCon 2020 has been cancelled due to the coronavirus.

GeForce Now

Now that publishers and developers have to opt-in, Nvidia's streaming service has shrunk once again, with 89 games leaving the service.

Kerbal Space Program 2

After ditching the original *KSP 2* studio, Star Theory Games, publisher Take-Two reportedly tried to poach its employees.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Fields of pristine, jagged glass stretch kaleidoscopic into infinity – ancient, yes, but also waiting to be built. Out of the corner of an eye, The Spy sees swirling snatches of the once and future. Empires fall and rise and fall again. Continents crack and collide with the violent force of epochal indifference. Bobby Kotick grows richer, richer, richer, and... oh god... Robert... no.

How could we have known? Sure, E3 has always been the tentpole event that the industry built itself around, and in that sense it was important. But it was also just a bit... naff. One of the unspoken curses of the videogame industry is that *everything* important trends towards self-parody. And so we took E3 for granted.

And then it disappeared; fractured into a million sub-E3s that tore through summer like a frag grenade through an overripe watermelon. It ripped through time, consuming the past and rewriting the future until left is up and down is purple. E3 is both not happening and *happening all the time*.

The Spy doesn't want to sound dramatic here, but everything is *very* wrong. Geoff Keighley has staked a claim to a four-month long alternative E3 constructed of entirely disparate elements, forming a patchwork monolith that threatens to consume every

passing event and circumstance. IGN has an E3. GamesRadar has an E3. *PC Gamer* has an E3. What about you, dear reader? Do you have an E3? Don't shake your head, because that is not the reality we are now living. You may have an E3 without even realising it.

The Spy turns a corner into a newly formed crystalline field, one The Spy has walked many times before. Icy winds speak of a past returned anew – an old foe revived. *Red Dead Redemption* is again the subject of remake rumours, this time courtesy of a rando posting unverified information to 4chan. Last time, you may remember, it was courtesy of a rando posting unverified information to Reddit, who later admitted that they had made it all up as some sort of “experiment”.

BORN FROM BLOOD

The Spy breaks into a sprint, innately understanding that even addressing these claims would compress the last 3,700 days into a thick, spreadable paste that tasted of despair and sesame oil. It's been weeks now, or has it been minutes? Eventually The Spy stops, and experiences several lunchtimes simultaneously. There are many eggs, but too few dipping soldiers.

Years earlier, or was it an hour later (or a minute sliced from Febraury?), The Spy is informed by a pulsing current of whatever the opposite of electricity is that streamer CaseyExplosion promised to donate \$100 to a racial justice charity if someone leaked details of a PC version of *Bloodborne*. Later, she tweeted a picture of the donation, saying, “I now know for a fact that it IS coming to PC.” Others joined the chorus, with former Game Informer editor Imran Khan saying that, “From Soft fans probably have a lot of reasons to be happy in the next two years.”

It is, of course, bold to assume the next two years are a thing that will happen in an ordered and linear fashion. The Spy is currently experiencing them backwards, at half

speed, in an attempt to slingshot around the orbit of a future E3 and back into the timeline as it exists right now. If it works, The Spy will see you next month. Spy out (of time). ■
The Spy

RED DEAD REDEMPTION IS AGAIN THE SUBJECT OF REMAKE RUMOURS



THE SPY
The Spy is The Spy is
The Spy is The Spy is
The Spy is.

This month in... 2010



1 It's something of an MMO special this month, as – for the second time on its cover – PC Gamer tackles *World of Warcraft*'s apocalyptic expansion *Cataclysm*. The difference between this and the majority of covers from the latter years of the previous decade is stark. No longer relying on a small handful of Xbox 360 ports, PC gaming is entering a new golden age. Also, there's *APB*.

ISSUE
216, August 2010
ON THE COVER
World of Warcraft
Cataclysm
IN THE CINEMAS
Toy Story 3

2 An early look at *Guild Wars 2* asks if ArenaNet's MMO revolution is too good to be true. It didn't change the world, but many live service games today would do well to learn its lessons.



3 *Farmville* was the great, industry disrupting menace of the time, and the subject of Dan Griliopoulos' in-depth report on 'social' gaming. It acutely sums up the problems with the design models these games used, and ends with some chilling predictions of how gamification would touch other aspects of our lives – although arguably misses how subtle and insidious those systems would be.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Bungie has had to adapt – but the live service team was ready for it.

POST-OFFICE

How devs are still making games like **DESTINY 2** amidst a pandemic

I thought I was an introverted person before this,” says Kirk Williford, a senior game designer on *Guild Wars 2*. After a few months in self-isolation as a result of the coronavirus, working on the MMO’s latest big update during the day and playing other games for escapism in the evenings, Williford realised he’s a lot more extroverted than he once thought. Daily casual human contact is one of those things anyone can take for granted when they work at an office, but after months without it, game developers who now work from home have to find new ways to make games and make do without the water cooler.

Working from home is nothing new for plenty of indie developers, but the pandemic means something very different for much bigger triple-A studios with dozens or hundreds of employees. What’s it like going completely remote for a developer like ArenaNet, which has to maintain *Guild Wars 2* while continuing to work on future updates, or Bungie, which has some 800 employees working on *Destiny*? The most basic answer is that they need a few more video meetings to keep everyone coordinated, and it’s difficult to make up for those little interactions, like spinning your chair around to look at what’s going on at the artist’s desk right behind you. But

they’ve mostly been able to roll with those challenges and keep their games right on track.

The unsung heroes behind any game released in 2020 are the IT workers who figured out how to get hundreds of PCs ready for developers to take home, or set them up to remote desktop into their work PC. They made it possible for developers to keep working, and at least in ArenaNet’s case, they did it absurdly quickly. “We had a two day turnaround,” says *Guild Wars 2* producer Kye Harris.

HOME ALONE

At Bungie, planning for the shift started when everyone was still in the building, but, “there was a constant rewiring of the mechanism,” says Carrie Gouskos, director of product development at Bungie. The first steps told employees what to do before they left the office to start working from home; later they were allowed to come into the office to do bits of setup, but as the pandemic spread that approach clearly couldn’t last. “We realised we were doing the same amount of contact exposure, just slower. If IT is still there and every human comes in one at a time and exposes IT ... so [we moved] to contactless delivery using a courier service,” she explains.

Ironically, the monumental task of making a live service game like *Destiny 2* actually helped prepare Bungie for the shift to remote work. “For the people working on the



Escape goat

Getting out of the house, even over video chat, is a novelty these days. To buoy spirits, ArenaNet set up an all-hands livestream for the team to take a remote tour of a California goat farm. They were sceptical at first, but it was such a wholesome distraction it quickly won them over. “It was actually really awesome,” Williford says.



LEFT: ArenaNet released a new episode for *Guild Wars 2* while in lockdown.

seasonal releases, it was kind of business as usual,” Gouskos says. “In fact, the teams that do that work were already set up to work from home because they have to day-in, day-out be prepared for emergencies. Nobody wants to ask people to work overtime, but the reality of a live service is, if something happens to the service in the middle of the night, people are getting called. That’s just the way it works. Those teams were actually prepared and kind of paved the way for the rest of us. They were like, ‘Yeah I can work from home. What do you need to know about it?’”

Making big budget games at home is partially about adapting the game development process, but it’s also about adapting games themselves to the reality of the moment. *Guild Wars 2*’s latest episode *The Icebrood Saga: No Quarter* released on May 26 without voice acting, because it was impossible to get all the actors into the studio before Hollywood shut down. The team talked about delaying the release. ArenaNet prided itself on *Guild Wars 2* being a fully voiced MMO. But they determined they could still hit their planned release date and decided to forge ahead without the voices. “It was important. Our players wanted something new to play,” Williford says.

No Quarter uses ‘gutturals’ instead of fully voiced dialogue (like the emotes Nintendo still uses in many of its games), and the designers had to find new ways to convey information to players with the UI and sound effects instead of voice. But there also turned out to be a big positive to those new constraints: they made Williford’s design team think more about the experience *Guild Wars 2*’s deaf players have always had.

Remote work has had some other benefits. Gouskos and Williford both pointed out that over video chat, rather than

in big conference rooms, it can be easier for quieter people to speak up and let their opinions be heard. Nate Simpson, the creative director on *Kerbal Space Program 2*, told me that he’s gotten a better sense of what it’s like for offsite contractors to work remotely and is working to become “a much more attentive lead” as a result.

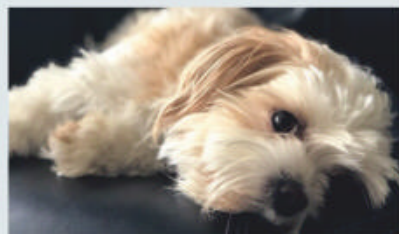
It can be challenging to focus on anything in the midst of a pandemic, and working from home with distractions like kids, pets and a tantalisingly close bed make it even more difficult. But Carrie Gouskos summed up a mood that, at least for

Bungie, pushes them forward.

“If this is a valuable distraction for people, if this is a comfort or a solace, something we can do that helps in some small way... I think there’s been a bit of a renewed effort,” she says. “People are home. People are tired. People are frustrated. People are sad. For game-makers, we often think about the games that are important to us and what they got us through, and I think there’s definitely a sense at the studio, a renewed sense of purpose around, ‘there is an import to what we do’. I don’t want to make it sound that important. But there is an import.” ■

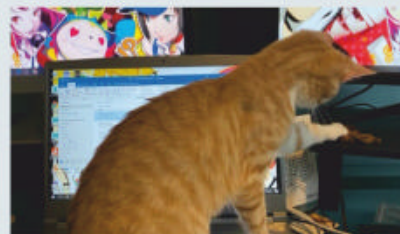
Wes Fenlon

CATURDAYS *Devs have been keeping each other sane by sharing pet pics*



GERALD

Carrie Gouskos’ pup Gerald knows how to mug for the camera. Aww, who’s a good boy? You are!



MILES

This ginger gentleman belongs to Bungie’s Laura Robinson, and clearly has good taste in JRPGs.



SESAME

Bungie’s James O’Donell is kept company by power-napping *Destiny* fan Sesame. Purr-fect.

THEY’VE MOSTLY BEEN ABLE TO ROLL WITH THOSE CHALLENGES AND KEEP THE GAMES ON TRACK

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

WIZARD'S CHESS

TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS was built from complaints about XCOM

When games journalists outline the problems with a game, they're often met with a familiar retort, "Why don't you make one then, if you're so clever?" And of course, most of us aren't. But for Tom Francis, a former staff writer at PC Gamer for nine years, that's become a foolproof method of development.

"I think my process is to play a game, articulate what I wish was different, and make a game that does it that way," he says. For *Tactical Breach Wizards*, the starting point was one of Francis' favourites: *XCOM 2*. "I love it, and I've played it for hundreds of hours, and yet I could talk forever about what's wrong with it... big, serious problems."

Francis vented his frustrations in a design document. *XCOM 2* battles could be much clearer, he argued, if they took place in simple, flat combat spaces. That way you could eliminate line of sight issues, and prevent extra groups of enemies showing up arbitrarily. What's more, by stripping out the metagame, you could prevent the unfairness of campaigns doomed by early mistakes, and counter any remaining problems with a free rewind button.

By the end, he had the makings of something new. But you can't release a game called *Problems I Had With XCOM 2*, and so Francis needed a theme. Then he remembered a ridiculous conversation the PC Gamer team once had about *Call of Duty* except with wizards: kevlar robes, silenced wands and self-serious military lingo. With the approval of former colleagues who, it has to be said, mostly didn't remember making the joke in the first place, Francis moved ahead with his vision for a SWAT team made up of spell-casting wizards.

Francis has always liked his magic the way he likes his tactics: consistent and rules-driven, "I love Magicka. It treats magic like a volatile, complicated science, where the most powerful effects are found by combining elements, but you're just as likely to electrocute yourself by forgetting your robe is wet when you try to mix lightning with steam."

For *Tactical Breach Wizards*, though, a shared magical ruleset risked making abilities too samey. "Each character has their own brand of magic that works differently, so any universal logic that united them would probably just make them less distinct," Francis says.

SWAT'S UP

For the SWAT side, Francis drew on *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2*, a series highlight, as well as the bombast and jingoism of *Call of Duty* campaigns. "All of their seriousness becomes funny in our wizardy context, I think," he says. Yet *Tactical Breach Wizards* is also anti-COD, wary of glamourising intervention as simple problem-solving. Its story concerns operatives who've become disillusioned with their masters, and are looking for clear actions to take in a messy world.

Like *Gunpoint* before it, the game is glued together by Francis' dialogue, which is daft, quick and true to its characters. It's a reflection of his principal writerly inspiration, Douglas Adams.

"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy could go absolutely anywhere, because he was making it up based largely on whatever seemed funny," Francis says. "That's definitely what I aspire to now: make the player laugh enough, early enough, that they start to trust that whatever comes next, they're in for a treat."

Two years after Francis and his team started work on *Tactical Breach Wizards*, it suddenly became apparent they weren't the only ones determined to fix some of *XCOM 2*'s problems. Firaxis announced *Chimera Squad*, a standalone *XCOM* game which ditched the global view in favour of simple levels and breach and clear tactics.

The similarities to *Tactical Breach Wizards* came as a shock. But, since *Chimera Squad* surprise launched just weeks after its announcement, it's served as even further inspiration for Francis. "It's so much in our wheelhouse that naturally we're looking at what worked and didn't in their approach, and where we might want to go bigger on some of the things that differentiate us," Francis says.

After all: *Chimera Squad* certainly doesn't have free rewinds or a character-driven story. It certainly doesn't have riot-gear Gandalf. Put that in your pipe and blow a smoke-ship with it. ■

Jeremy Peel

TACTICAL MAN'S OEUVRE

Revisit the games of Francis' Suspicious Developments



GUNPOINT
A stealth puzzle game. Very few guns are pointed, but lots of windows get broken.



FLOATING POINT
All that defenestration turns into serene soaring, with the help of a grappling hook.



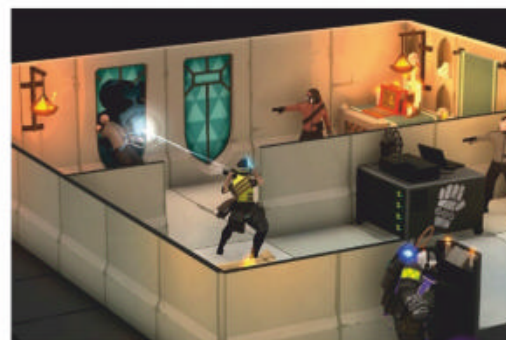
MORPHBLADE
Tactical Breach Wizards' grids are pre-echoed in this hex-based bug battler.



HEAT SIGNATURE
Infiltrate spaceships and get yourself out of scrapes with style.



**“I LOVE MAGICKA. IT TREATS
MAGIC LIKE A VOLATILE,
COMPLICATED SCIENCE”**



ABOVE: The story campaign is planned to be about eight hours long.

LOWER LEFT: Battles take place in small, minimalist rooms, allowing for super clear tactical choices.



DNA Tracing

■ GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

**DIGGING INTO
HALO'S CODE
SPARKED A NEW WAY
OF THINKING AT
THE STUDIO**

GRINDING GEARS

A plucky *Half-Life* expansion developer invents the loot-shooter

An enormous caterpillar has taken up residence in the waste disposal sector of Black Mesa. Unlike many of its peers from the planet Xen, the monstrous pit worm cannot be dislodged with machine-gun fire or experimental weapons. Instead, like the toxic materials that used to occupy this space, it must be flushed: first by turning the main pressure valve, then by hitting the emergency override button on the primary pump's gearbox. Valve and Gearbox.

It's Gearbox Software's Hideo Kojima moment; an early effort to establish its own authorial voice, and to list its name among the greats. For a few years after *Half-Life: Opposing Force*, the studio's name would continue to follow Valve's, on another two expansion packs, and in the credits of *Counter-Strike*. But even then, a distinct identity was beginning to form.

Where Valve's *Half-Life* had been a solitary, at times lonely journey through the bowels of Black Mesa, *Opposing Force* cast you as a US Marine – and Marines fight in squads. In an era when functional companion AI was rare, Gearbox threw in two or three friendlies at a time, and gave them specialities: the medic asks you to hold still as he injects health points

into your veins; the engineer lights his welding torch with a cigarette and kicks down doors. Though unnamed, these comrades on a mission gone wrong had big personalities. They offered not just extra firepower, but company.

SQUAD SHOOTIN'

That design became the foundation for Gearbox's first original series, *Brothers in Arms*. While its period setting and poignant tone clearly owed plenty to *Band of Brothers*, broadcast just a few years earlier, its squad tactics marked a meaningful evolution from *Opposing Force*. Soldiers could be directed to cover, ordered to suppress enemies, or led in a charge on the enemy's position. As in *Half-Life*, they were vulnerable: a foolish decision could see them bleed out in French fields, and this time you were aware of their names, fears and families back home.

That's one thread of Gearbox's history; the one that drove their success through the noughties, and the reason you know Randy Pitchford's name. But another was developing simultaneously in the background, and would grow to engulf the studio entirely.

Developers often begin their careers working on ports – the work-for-hire jobs that see games prepared for release on extra platforms. It's work that's often overlooked as uncreative, but porting *Halo: Combat Evolved* to the PC had a profound effect on Gearbox. It set the path for its next project, a first-person shooter which would feature recharging shields, driveable vehicles, and underground secrets on an alien world. And digging into the data-driven architecture of *Halo*'s code sparked a new way of thinking at the studio, encouraging it to experiment with procedurally generated weapons. Gearbox never built its own *Halo* game, though at one stage it was set to do just that; instead, its familiarity with *Halo* led straight to *Borderlands*.

CROSSING THE BORDER

The idea, at the time, was new: to apply the RNG, levelling and loot cycle of *Diablo* to an FPS, without losing the immediate and dynamic feedback players had felt in *Half-Life*. The AI teammates that had made *Opposing Force* and *Brothers in Arms* memorable became co-op partners. Like the Marines, *Borderlands*' four characters each had distinct roles, but now they came from the realm of

BELOW: A trusty crowbar can get you through most things.

BOTTOM: The first friendly AI to be uncomfortable with photography.



RANDY ON RECORD

A selection of Pitchford's finest quotes

On videogame storytelling...

"Frankly I think the entire industry is in the Stone Age."

On *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' haters...

"We moved those people, we touched them."

On *Duke Nukem Forever*...

"Have you ever seen weird, bizarre art you don't even understand? The artist who created it clearly did it for a reason and loved it."

On criticism...

"I've always profited from it and, thankfully, I have never been in short supply."

LASTING LEGACY

How Gearbox Software weaved its way through other games

KEY

- Gearbox
- Valve
- Microsoft



BROTHERS IN ARMS

A fully-fledged tactical FPS that tugs at the heart strings.



BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

A sequel developed in seven months.

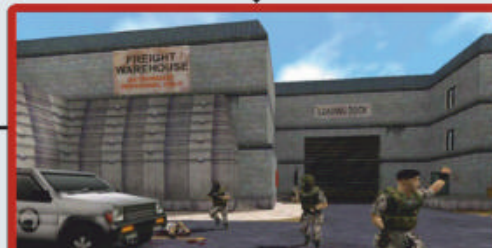


BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY

Last and least well-received in the series.

HALF-LIFE

Valve's masterpiece spawned a series of spin-offs.



HALF-LIFE: OPPOSING FORCE

Gearbox shines in its first attempt at a squad shooter.



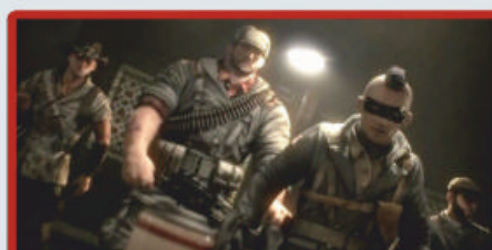
HALF-LIFE: BLUE SHIFT

Barney the security guard has a very bad day at Black Mesa.



HALF-LIFE: DECAY

A bold co-op experiment that modders have since brought to PC.



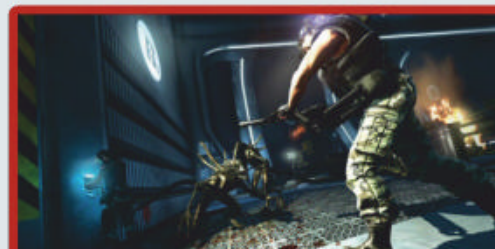
BROTHERS IN ARMS: FURIOUS 4

Tongue in cheek, co-op, and doomed to cancellation.



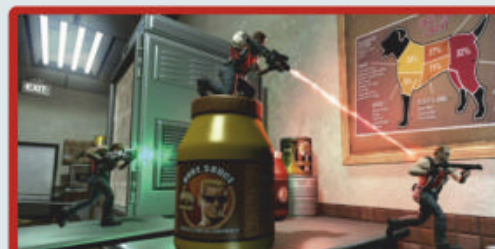
BATTLEBORN

Ideas from *Furious 4* were folded into this MOBA-ish shooter.



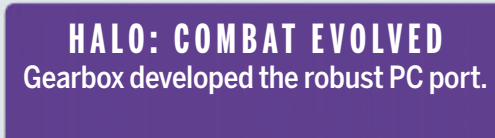
ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

(I wish the) game (was) over, man.



DUKE NUKEM FOREVER

Decades of development hell did not bode well.



HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

Gearbox developed the robust PC port.



BORDERLANDS

Decay's two players become four.



BORDERLANDS 2

Bigger, better, and with more annoying dialogue.



BORDERLANDS 3

Gearbox learned important lessons from *Destiny* for this megahit.



» fantasy RPGs: tank, mage, ranger, and berserker. Tactics were something you coordinated over voice chat, rather than with a right click on the mouse.

Borderlands proved itself to be incredibly forward-thinking, predicting the direction of shooters over the next decade, and opening up a money seam that has sustained the studio to this day. It also seemed to close off a part of Gearbox's identity, to the frustration of long-term fans. When a new *Brothers in Arms* sequel was announced at E3 in 2011, it more closely resembled *Borderlands* than its parent series, eschewing historical authenticity for "tall tales".

Four player characters, including a Texan with a cattle prod and an Irishman with a penchant for taser-ing Nazis in the balls, would clear levels punctuated by silly set-pieces, like a runaway ferris wheel. Such was the backlash against this new vision for *Brothers in Arms* that *Furious 4* simply never came out.

Gearbox still retained enough nostalgia for the '90s to buy up *Duke Nukem Forever*, taking on its attendant baggage and inevitable disappointment. Yet when the studio won the licence for *Aliens: Colonial Marines*, the perfect opportunity to follow a squad through an *Opposing Force*-style gibfest, it failed to rise to the occasion. Meanwhile, the *Borderlands* games enjoyed critical acclaim. It was as if one part of Gearbox's personality had swallowed the other.

GENRE-BLENDED

Gearbox's most fascinating failure, in a competitive field, has been *Battleborn*. The intent was to do for MOBAs what *Borderlands* had for action-RPGs – folding the highly tactical mess of cooldown abilities, teamfights and friendly minions into the form of a first-person shooter. The resulting game is far from meritless, despite the shrieking dialogue which, like *Borderlands*, leans much too hard on idioms to get cheap laughs. It boasts a striking palette of deep reds, and hand-animated cutscenes set to old-school hip hop.

GEARBOX'S MOST FASCINATING FAILURE, IN A COMPETITIVE FIELD, HAS BEEN BATTLEBORN

But *Battleborn* was a victim of Gearbox's own success. While the studio had once been ahead of the curve, laying the ground for loot-shooters, *Battleborn* was an idea any other developer could conceive of – in large part thanks to *Borderlands*. At release, *Battleborn* was famously

overshadowed by *Overwatch*, with Gearbox looking on as its nascent community defected to Blizzard's rival game. Since then, it's threatened to become a mono-studio, built solely around the success of one series.

It's not that *Battleborn* was derivative – it's that the DNA of Gearbox has become the DNA of triple-A games at large. That's to the studio's enormous credit – but it might be time for the developer to reach back into its past and dust off the tactical squad shooter that I would like to see. That way it can escape from the zeitgeist it's built and start standing out again, rather than simply repeating itself over and over again. ■

Jeremy Peel



ABOVE: The game that set Gearbox on its most profitable path.

BELOW LEFT: *Borderlands*' art style came about late in development.



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PREVIEW

Everspace 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

December (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Rockfish Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

everspace.game

EVERSPACE 2

Strap in and explore the vast reaches of space

Space is mostly bleak and empty," says Michael Schade, CEO of Rockfish Games, the developer of *Everspace 2*. Without getting too Douglas Adams about it, this makes open space combat games "boring, because most of the time you shoot at tiny pixel clusters in the distance without having a concrete sense of player orientation and movement".

We're playing the prototype build of this space shooter, the one that appeared at PAX East back in late February and which would have been shown off at this summer's entertainment shows if they hadn't been cancelled. It's playable, in that it functions – you fly through space exploring, shooting and trading. It's not exactly coherent yet, however, with little sense of purpose or mission structure. A whole mission-tracking system exists in the game but doesn't work, and upon selecting your ship you're dumped out in space with none of the pre-game preamble we're used to.

It's certainly a good looking game. Forebears like *Elite Dangerous* have been making the endless void into a tourist attraction for a while, knowing that it's not the howling vacuum itself that's interesting, but the things you encounter along the way, such as ringed planets, disintegrating space stations, and outlaw bases built into asteroids. "We love the freedom of exploration that *Elite Dangerous* provides the player," says Schade, "as well as the added weight of travelling with limited resources, and navigation through dangerous territories." Strong storytelling and the arcade-style gameplay of *Everspace 2* is less about the simulation of spaceship management and more about jumping into combat, so a lot of the design ends up being dramatically different in comparison.

PLAYED
IT

"In fact, *Freelancer* is our main gameplay reference, which we took a lot of inspiration from regarding both controls and the desire for an open-world experience and deeper storytelling. Our visual and sound design come more from *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Star Wars*, while itemisation stems from *Destiny* and *Diablo*. Second-to-second combat gets its roots from classic shooters like *Halo*."

SHIPPING OUT

Freelancer was one of the first games to pop into our minds too, when we saw the third-person view and wheeling acrobatics that combat around the shattered rocks and isolated trading posts requires. The original *Everspace*, which came out in 2017, was similar, and part of a wave of space games we were generally delighted to see. "Beyond having been inspired by other iconic sci-fi games to build our vision, we also want *Everspace 2* to stand out from its peers," says Schade. "So we are throwing a lot of our own ideas into the mix, especially when it comes to locations filled with lots of points of interest and various activities, which we believe is unique in the space games genre."

Locations we've seen include your home base, a mining corporation facility sunk into an enormous rock with a portal to a crystal cave, and a trading post that hangs over a ringed planet like a gigantic version of the ISS. You land at them to carry out repairs, rearm and do a little shopping – scooping cargo out of containers spilled from spaceship wrecks and selling it. There's a lot of loot, bringing a *Diablo*-esque edge as you Hoover everything up, making space in the cargo bay by jettisoning scrap metal in favour of Earth wine.

"We're designing the game as a looter-shooter in space," says Schade. "This means the majority of the content you find from blasting fighters and destroying warships will come in the form

"SECOND-TO-SECOND COMBAT GETS ITS ROOTS FROM CLASSIC SHOOTERS LIKE HALO"



PREVIEW

Everspace 2

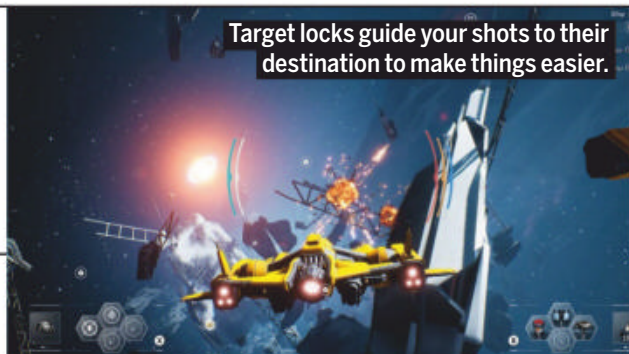


It doesn't matter which time period a game is set in, bad guys will always hoard explosive barrels.

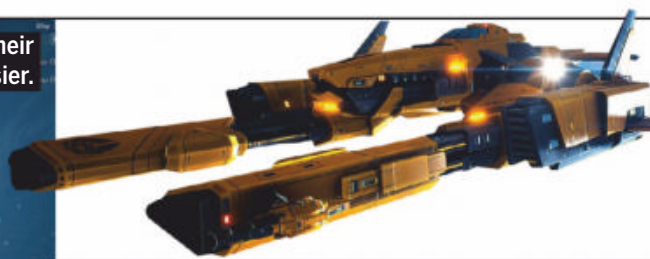
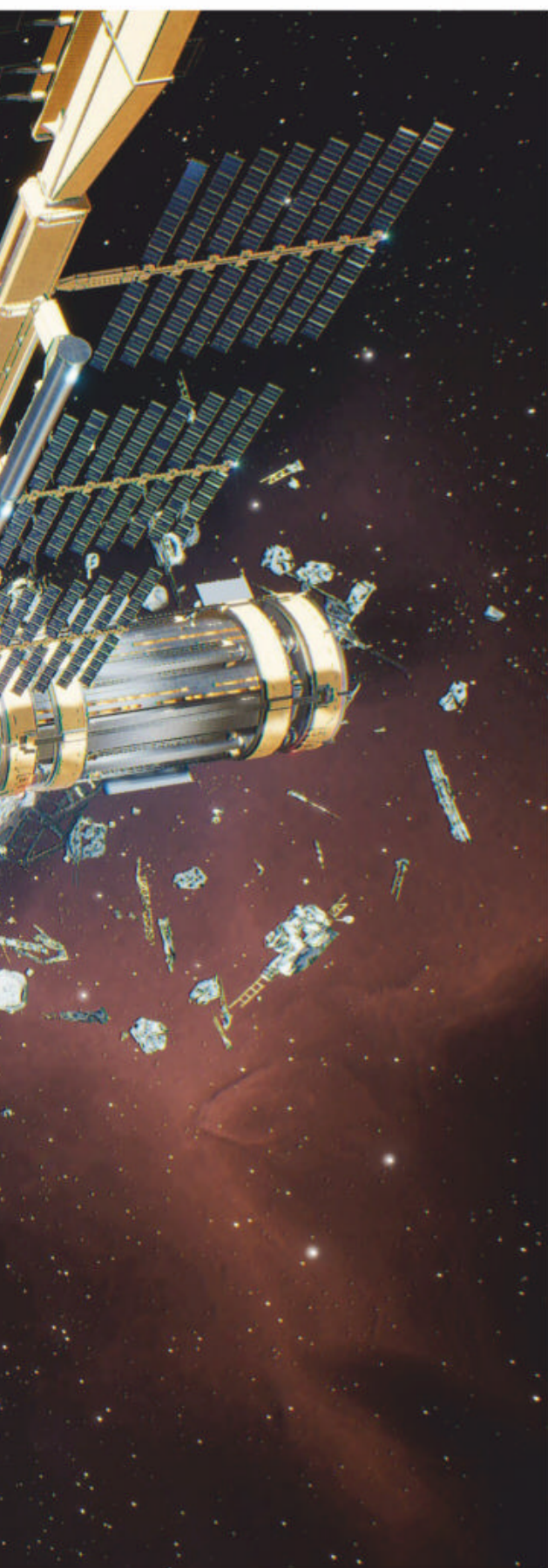


An 'Action Freeze' button opens up a photo mode.





Target locks guide your shots to their destination to make things easier.



» of modules, weapons, craftables, commodities, and upgrades.”

SPACE TO ROAM

Locations are a mixture of procedurally generated and hand-crafted, with two forms of fast travel – in-system and trans-system – letting you zip around freely. The open-world feeling is strong, as you drop out of warp into planetary orbit, discovering the wealth of mining operations and outlaw bases that nestle between the bigger rocks. Distress calls attract you to wreckage, and mysterious shadow creatures clamber about on the outside of asteroids. A prompt encourages you to get two of the black, fuzzy aliens together, but they never hang around long enough for you to do it. These, along with the ‘ancient damage glyphs’ that hang in space for you to collect and use, are currently unexplained, and the incorporation of background briefings and lore into the game will go a long way to clarifying the situation.

Striking the balance between the two approaches has led to some challenges for the developers, as Schade explains, “If you want to make a space sim where exploration for hundreds or even thousands of hours is the key selling point, then there is no way around procedural world generation, and there are some great examples for this concept. However, while this design approach allows for creating game worlds with perhaps quintillions of ‘unique’ locations to explore, there are some fundamental downsides.

“You cannot work with high-quality pre-baked global illumination solutions in most procedurally generated game environments, especially if the game world is truly seamless. You can go for a more stylised look, where real-time lighting might be sufficient, but in today’s tech and media world that is heavily driven by innovation and imagery, visual quality matters a lot. We had to put a lot of effort into preventing props, loot and NPCs from spawning in the wrong places.”

So by having a limited number of hand-made locations, linked by fast-travel, and an enormous number of procedurally generated areas that might not be so important for the story but are rich in

resources, the illusion of a much larger, open world can be created. To achieve this, “it is key to establish a strong signature look and feel during the first hour by introducing the player to clear design rules and plausible patterns for the environment, NPCs and the player spaceship, especially if there aren’t any extravehicular activities in the game,” says Schade. “This will be the foundation for players to build a much larger fictitious world in their minds, which will continuously be growing with every new piece of content discovered over time.”

GALAXY QUESTS

You also need a decent set of interesting characters and creatures inhabiting the game world and doing their own thing, or even the best-looking hand-crafted open game world risks feeling small and dead. “This takes quite some time and effort to create,” says Schade, “and is also hard to scale, so often the approach is to just rely on a broad range of gameplay activities, and pitch the idea of players writing their own stories as an advantage, which most only works in multiplayer games and if the mechanics provide enough depth.”

Ensuring there’s enough for the players to do in the world is another challenge that often besets open world developers. “Having lots of shipwrecks, derelict space stations, and all sorts of debris floating around not only provides a distinct sense of game space and player speed. It also allows for players and enemies to hide and sneak up on each other, and take cover when needed,” says Schade.

And of course, not doing something can be as valid a choice as doing it. Many quiet hours have been passed in games just hauling huge quantities of a valuable commodity for a big payday. “If space truckers want to put emphasis on trade routes, they will be able to do so,” says Schade. “Mining can still be point-and-shoot for players who want to be quick about it, but we’re also experimenting with a minigame for better yield and extracting precious special resources to make mining instances more exciting and interesting.” Otherwise, there will be jobs the player can accept from factions in the game to grow through non-combat means, including ore extraction and commerce. “It really is up to the players how to progress in *Everspace 2*,” Schade continues. “It’s a little too early to say, but we might even have a Pacifist achievement in the final game.”

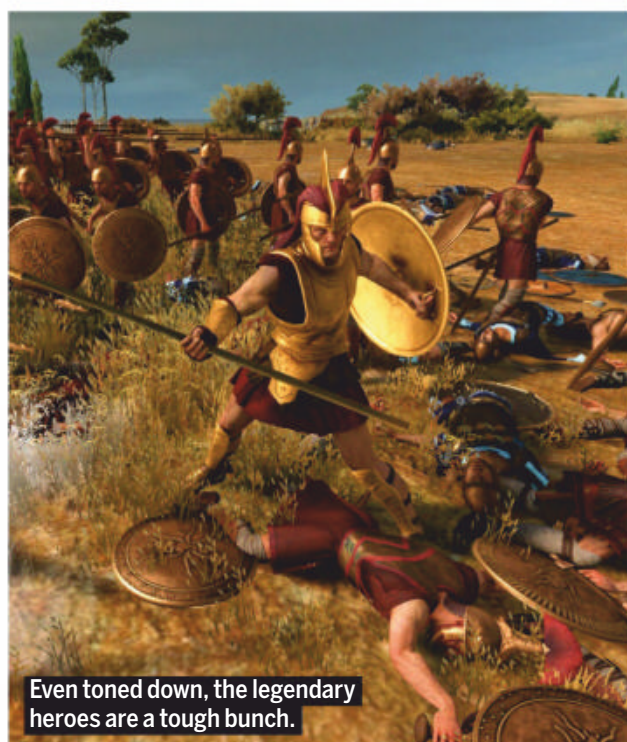
Ian Evenden, Chris Burke

“IT IS KEY TO ESTABLISH A STRONG SIGNATURE LOOK AND FEEL DURING THE FIRST HOUR”

PREVIEW

A Total War Saga: Troy

Conquer the right territory and you can field some centaur cosplayers.



Even toned down, the legendary heroes are a tough bunch.



A Total War Saga: Troy



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 13

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly Sofia

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
totalwar.com/games/troy

A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY

It's time for a mythological grudge match

Two armies hold opposing ends of a battlefield. The sun's out – it's a nice day for a fight – and in the background sits a city, nestled behind stalwart walls. It's the calm before *A Total War Saga: Troy's* storm, but any second now a man dressed up as a bull is going to start massacring my poor troops.

At least I've got Achilles on my side, and hopefully he's packed some reinforced sandals. Troy's legendary leaders are extremely gifted in combat and the echo of the fantastical stuff established in *Warhammer* continues here, but the heroes' abilities are less magical, and they're less of the big nuclear threat than their predecessors.

While they aren't quite as supernaturally gifted as their cousins in other *Total Wars*, they still sit at the heart of *Troy*. Every faction uses its primary hero as a foundation, so Achilles' armies are full of fast units that have a penchant for charging, just like their boss. The Trojan troops belonging to his opponent, Hector, on the other hand, are heavily armoured and focused on defence.

This grounding of myth is even more apparent in *Troy's* treatment of units like centaurs and special heroes such as the Minotaur and Cyclops. They're all human. The centaurs, for instance, are just people who are very good at riding horses and also happen to wear hats with horns.

Infantry is the focus this time, so factions lack the mounted and siege units that you might be used to. The mythic

units fill some of the gaps, letting you field exotic cavalry to chase down enemies, or smash down city walls without a siege engine. You'll need to control the right territory first, however, and the mythic units are limited in number.

Making up for the dearth of cavalry and other *Total War* mainstays, infantry has been significantly expanded. Units are now split into distinct weight classes that determine their speed and stamina, and within those classes are more specialised units, like ones particularly talented at charging or withstanding flanking attacks, and even a few that can switch weapons.

TIP OF THE SPEAR

Troy does feel more micromanagement-intensive as a result. Even units without active abilities have quirks that require lots of hands-on attention. There's a two-handed spearman unit that I grew quite fond of because of the damage it can do when charging, but in regular combat it absolutely sucks. You're meant to yank them out of the fray and have them hunting down soft targets, but that can be a challenge when you've got 19 other units to worry about. They died a lot.

New terrain creates more wrinkles, too. Mud, sand and tall grass present new opportunities for catching enemies with their pants down as you rush at them when they're stuck or ambush them without the assistance of a forest. These obstacles aren't just plonked down in an obvious place that screams "Have your big fight here," however, so you'll need to think about how to take advantage of them.

Thankfully the pace hasn't suffered. There's more going on than you'll be used to, but the demo battle is surprisingly brisk. You can chase down enemy troops even without cavalry, smash the enemy line with devastating charges and use flanking attacks more effectively.

The rhythm of battle does feel different, though, with more dynamism and a larger array of tools to play with. *Total War* fights can often feel like you're just managing a battle, but with *Troy* it feels like you're right in the thick of things, making frequent adjustments and adapting to imminent catastrophes, like a raging bull rushing towards you.

Fraser Brown

PLAYED IT



Achilles' troops love nothing more than a good old fashioned charge.

THE CENTAURS, FOR INSTANCE, ARE JUST PEOPLE WHO ARE VERY GOOD AT RIDING HORSES

PREVIEW

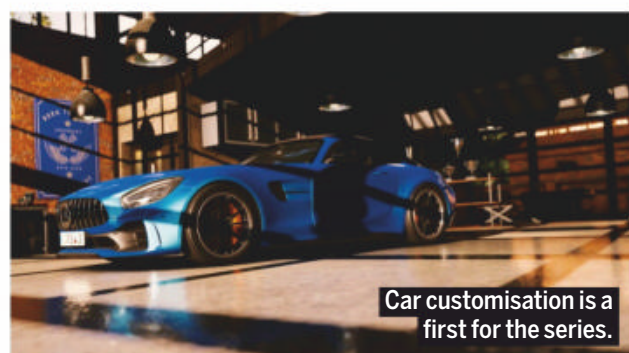
Project Cars 3



A shiny Acura NSX racing on a new track, Interlagos.



A Corvette Stingray in Shanghai, another new track.



Car customisation is a first for the series.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer

DEVELOPER
Slightly Mad Studios

PUBLISHER
Codemasters

LINK
projectcarsgame.com/three

PROJECT CARS 3

So many improvements we could barely fit them all in one article

Project Cars has amassed a large, loyal following of virtual motorsport fans, thanks in part to its impressively realistic car physics. But the series has always been missing a few of the features expected from a modern racing sim – something its developer is remedying in this scaled-up sequel.

First up, career mode. This has been rebuilt from scratch, with the intention of giving players a better sense of progression. In your career you'll progress through ten car classes, earning XP as you go, unlocking upgrade parts and new events. But if you don't like a particular type of event, you can spend in-game currency to skip over it. This is so players don't feel tied down, forced to drive cars they don't enjoy.

You'll notice I mentioned car upgrades. This is something *Project Cars* has been sorely missing, and it's great to see it finally making an appearance. Previously we've been able to customise a car's performance, but now we can radically change it with a new engine, exhaust, suspension, and so on.

DRIVE TO SUCCEED

This also means you can take a favourite car all the way through a career, from the lowest level to high-end events, increasing its performance index with new parts. Developer Slightly Mad Studios wants players to feel like they're constantly progressing, and playing in any mode, including multiplayer, will earn you

experience points and in-game currency. You don't even need to come first: just participating is enough.

Multiplayer has always been a big part of *Project Cars*, and there are three distinctive ways to play in the new game. Quick Play will throw you into a race, using skill-based matchmaking – another first for the series. But if you'd prefer something more curated, the Scheduled Event mode will feature races hand-crafted by the developer. And, finally, Custom Lobby is the classic *Project Cars* sandbox experience, letting you tweak rules, weather, cars, and tracks to create any kind of race you like.

Slightly Mad is also promising improved stability and latency when playing online. I also like how any visual customisation you do to your car, whether it's a simple paint job or an elaborate decal design, will be visible to other players when you race online. And if you don't have a suitable car in your personal garage for an online event, you can borrow one to take part. Accessibility is something else the developer wants to improve in *PC3*, removing as many barriers to having fun as possible.

There's also a new asynchronous multiplayer mode called Rivals, which has its own unique ranking and rewards structure. Slightly Mad will manage a series of events, with fresh daily, weekly and monthly challenges. Do well and you'll climb the leaderboard, beating other players and earning XP. You can also drop down the board, which is an incentive to dive back in and try and claim back your spot. These leaderboards will be separated into divisions based on skill, so if you're a newbie you won't have to compete against seasoned veterans.

That's a lot of new stuff, but there's more. Two new tracks have been revealed, including the streets of Shanghai and legendary motorsport circuit Interlagos in Sao Paulo. The gamepad controls have been tweaked too, to make driving with one more satisfying. New post-processing effects, camera shake and motion blur have been added to make racing more visually exciting. And the singleplayer AI is being massively improved.

If this all as good as it sounds, *Project Cars 3* could be seriously special.

Andy Kelly

FIRST
LOOK

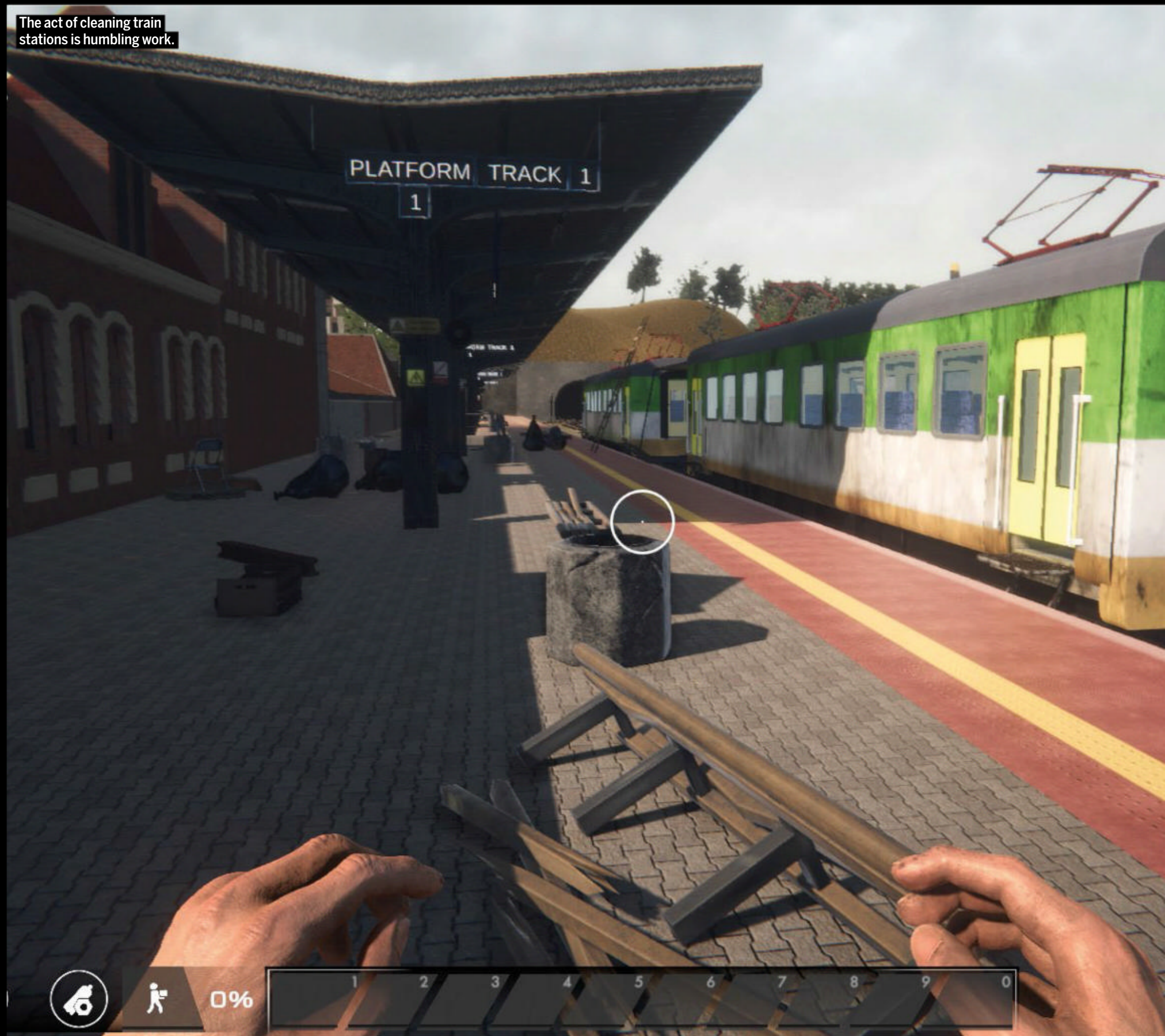
The car models are incredibly detailed.

IF YOU DON'T LIKE A PARTICULAR EVENT, YOU CAN SPEND CURRENCY TO SKIP IT

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Train Station Renovation

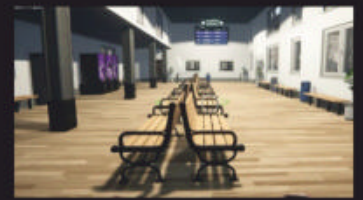
The act of cleaning train stations is humbling work.



You can buy new furniture and decorations from your handy tablet.



Hopefully exposure to this toxic waste isn't deadly.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
2021

DEVELOPER
Live Motion Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
livemotiongames.com

TRAIN STATION RENOVATION

Restoring train stations is humble but rewarding work

In this unusual sim, you play as a one-person restoration company specialising in cleaning and repairing abandoned railway stations. In the same vein as *House Flipper* or *Viscera Cleanup Detail*, there's a big ol' mess, and you're the muggins that's going to clean it all up.

A whole string of stations have unfortunately fallen to a sorry state, and you'll be working your way through each one, turning trash into treasure as you go. You start by working on a small village's single-platform station, and work your way up to the grottiest inner-city stations, all of them in a terrible state of disrepair. You'll need to pick up the trash, scrub the graffiti off walls, sweep the floors, replace old furniture, and rip up weeds you find until the whole place looks as good as new.

If *Train Station Renovation* is starting to sound like a long list of mundane chores, that's... sort of what it is. There's mindless joy in following a set of easy to understand directions and switching your brain off. When you first start to explore a station it can be a bit overwhelming, but I found myself settling into a natural rhythm as I worked my way through each building. I quickly found a kind of zen calm in the monotony of my routine.

You have a set of upgradable mops, sponges, and brooms to help you clean, and *Train Station Renovation* has a helpful tool wheel that lets you quickly move between them. Upgrading my flimsy

sponge to a power washer brought me so much joy. No longer would I have to scrub dirty walls, I could just unleash the water and obliterate dirt into nothing. Oddly satisfying, that.

You might have the most powerful inventory of cleaning tools known to man, but renovating train stations is a humble job, and some work requires using your hands. Picking up litter from the station will fill a black rubbish bag which you can then hurl into a skip. You have the option of separating what you've collected into different recycling bins and earning a little money, but I'm a terrible person and enjoy the feeling of just flinging it all into one multi-purpose skip. You can magically empty the skip whenever you like, but I would always let mine pile up into a mountain of trash – a proud monument representing the accumulation of all my hard work at a station.

TAKE YOUR TIME

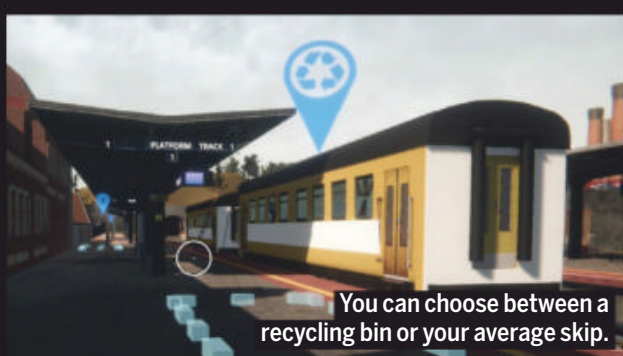
A to-do list keeps you on track of what needs to be done. Cleaning and clearing is one aspect, but you'll also be replacing train parts, repairing the electrics and decorating the station. There's no timer and you're free to approach the job however you like. With simple controls and an easy list of tasks to follow, you can easily slip into a calm meditative state.

There's a weirdly wholesome feeling to *Train Station Renovation*, too. Restoring these communal spaces I see as humble but worthy work. Even when dealing with the grimmest city stations, it's providing a service that benefits many. One level has you tidying up the aftermath of a rowdy football match that got out of hand – bloody hooligans! There are beer cans and glass strewn about all over the platforms and cleaning it up feels like you're helping to restore order from chaos.

It's those details that turn your renovation services into more than just simple cleaning... or maybe I've just been playing too much. I did do a quick search recently to see if there were any *Train Station Renovation* speed runners – there aren't. I'll have to wait and see if an underground speed cleaning scene pops up when the game leaves Early Access some time next year.

Rachel Watts

THERE'S MINDLESS JOY IN FOLLOWING A SET OF EASY TO UNDERSTAND DIRECTIONS



You can choose between a recycling bin or your average skip.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Titan Chaser

The cut-and-pasted petrol station does not make a good landmark.



Spot the monster.



A good chunk of your screen is eaten up by the car's dashboard.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£4

DEVELOPER
Stas Shostak

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/2UpMHfg

TITAN CHASER

Stranger Things meets *American Truck Simulator*

The night fog is thick as I drive towards Windland Plains in my borrowed company hatchback, its engine rattling so loud I can hardly hear the radio. A few feet in front of the windscreen, my headlights cast a sodium haze. Any further, and the weather reduces everything to shapes in the darkness. Perfect conditions for monster hunting, then.

Well... I say 'hunting'. Don't expect the thrills of Capcom's monster hit here. The wyverns and colossi you encounter in *Titan Chaser* don't present any threat, and your interactions never get any more violent than shining a spotlight in their general direction. You play, essentially, as a supernatural park ranger, keeping an eye on these titans and nudging them towards home when necessary. But first you've got to find them.

I'm fiddling with the dials of the car stereo when it happens. In the corner of my vision, something moves. Suddenly, a low buzzsaw roar envelops me. Looking up to the sky, against the shimmer of the aurora borealis, I see blinking spots of green and pink. I can't help but brace for abduction. The lights and sounds come into focus... and it's a passenger plane, emerging from the clouds.

As you drive around *Titan Chaser's* small open-world map – where it is eternally night – there's a lot of dead time. Long minutes of winding down country roads, unable to see much of anything. It frequently edges on boredom, but this

only adds to those moments where you do see something. Your eyes adjusting as you realise that shape in the distance, the one that you've not been paying any attention to, just moved – it's enough to put your heart in your mouth.

The handbrake gives a familiar creak as I pull it on. I cut the engine – in the sudden silence I can hear crickets in the grass outside – and power up the spotlight, which is on the roof. In the few seconds it's taken to get out of the car, I've lost sight of my quarry. I scan the horizon until the beam lands on a lumbering giant in the mist and... as with any shadow-clinging bogeyman, the illusion melts away under the bright light.

CLASH OF THE TITAN

It's very, very early days for *Titan Chaser*, and it shows – so much of what I encounter feels like a placeholder. Hearing a repeated voice line or passing an identical petrol station twice, a few hundred metres apart. But these aren't deal breakers. What's more of a concern is the titans themselves. There are just two to encounter at the moment, and seen up close, they're not especially striking – casting light on the wyvern reveals a generic model that, after the fact, it takes 30 seconds to track down on the Unity Asset Store.

That said, less than two weeks into Early Access, the game is already on its sixth update. In my first session I head to Bright City, a locked-off area at the edge of the map, and find Tron-esque neon monoliths that stretch into the sky. Returning a few days later, they've been replaced with actual tower blocks. This is Early Access in the rawest sense – a world being sketched in beneath your feet, and a game gradually finding itself.

I can't quite recommend *Titan Chaser*, yet, but there's undeniably something here. A game that captures the loneliness and freedom of driving late at night with only the radio for company as well as any since *American Truck Simulator*, and manages to create moments of quiet awe, even with its generic monster models. It's a little buried right now, but if *Titan Chaser's* developer can track down that game amidst the fog, we could be in for something truly special.

Alex Spencer

PLAYED IT



This mixtape combines atmospheric electro with 1940s radio plays. Tune!



I SCAN THE HORIZON UNTIL THE BEAM LANDS ON A LUMBERING GIANT IN THE MIST

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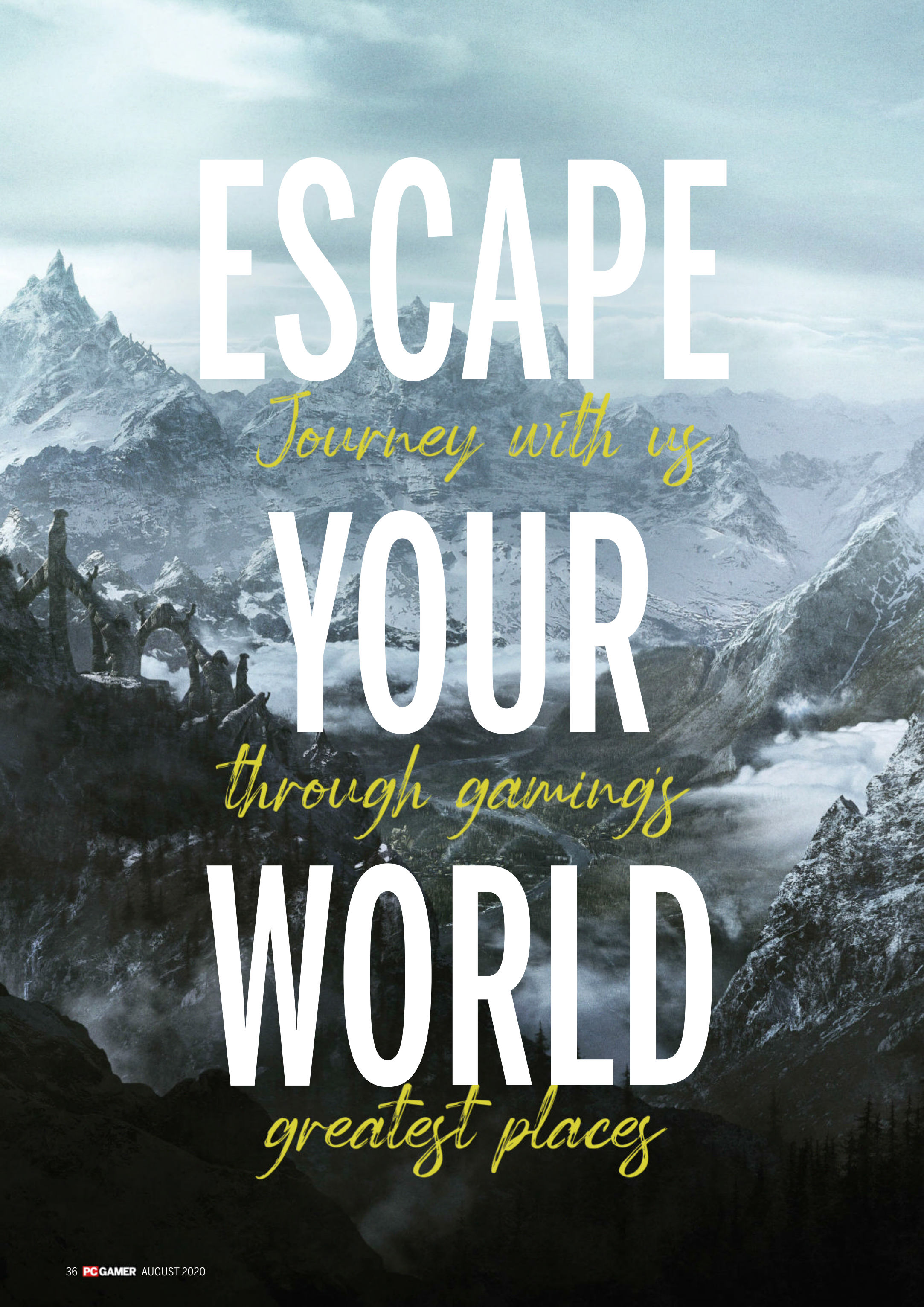
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ESCAPE

Journey with us

YOUR

through gaming's

WORLD

greatest places



S

ometimes the real world weighs heavy on us all. This year, it's felt like about 2,020 kilos' worth. It can make luxuries like videogames feel pretty frivolous. But, at the same time, your PC can provide the perfect escape.

Virtual worlds, despite more often than not being embroiled in their own wars and conflicts, are happier, simpler places, where everything makes sense and, as long as you keep plugging away, you're always making progress towards resolution and success. They can show you beautiful, impossible things; provide a sandbox for your creativity and imagination; or just be a warm and pleasant space to exist in for an hour or two.

When times are dark, that's a magic worth celebrating more than ever, not dismissing. Over the following pages, that's exactly what we're going to do. Read on to discover some of our very favourite videogame worlds, and the thoughts, opinions, and experiences borne from them. Perhaps after, you might take a little time to delve back into one of yours.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED
ORIGINS

Real Magical

How the gritty reality of **THE WITCHER 3**'s sorcery makes The Continent feel like home. *By Harry Shepherd*

The scene before me is unfathomably ghastly. Charred limbs and torsos the colour of charcoal are only things that suggest that these are humans littering the ground as I pick through the gore to find a man's lost brother. I've witnessed the carnage that remains of this battle between the forces of Nilfgaard and Temeria before in the deceptively-quaint region of White Orchard before, some years ago – so what possessed me to return to this nightmarish world?

Well, for a start, *The Witcher 3* isn't all battlefields and rotting flesh. In fact, it's frequently staggering in its beauty, from the rugged pastoral scenes of Skellige to the bustling metropolis of Novigrad. Nevertheless, amid the bucolic rolling hills and the sparkling rivers running between them, tragedy lies. Civilians are murdered by soldiers, husbands abuse their wives, and serial killers play twisted, deadly games. Even in Toussaint, a fairytale space of impossible allure, the monstrous and cruel can be found beneath its shimmering surface.

While The Continent isn't exactly a holiday destination, few videogame worlds have had me so enchanted. It's an environment that feels real and, most importantly, human, warts and all. And, in many ways, that's not in spite of the fantastical magic and supernatural monsters inked into the world's rich canvas, but because of it.

Yes, some supernatural stuff comes from the Conjunction of the Spheres, where a collision of realms allowed magic to appear, but magic in *The Witcher 3* otherwise tends to be rooted in something real. It doesn't just exist, it comes *from* somewhere. Manifestations of magic emerge from actions and foibles that are resolutely human. Take the Velen contract, Jenny O' The Woods, that has Geralt hunting a nightwraith. On further investigation, you discover that the demon was once a Temerian woman called Zula, violently murdered by a man whose romantic advances she'd once spurned.

RED WEDDING

You encounter countless examples like this throughout your journey in *The Witcher 3*. Family Matters sees you meeting the Bloody Baron, a man who's drunkenness and violence led to his wife's miscarriage. Then there's The White Lady, originally a woman who on her wedding day chose suicide over

an arranged marriage to a much older man. Often monsters you're paid to exterminate are far from monstrous at all. Just like the singed husks decaying on the ground of White Orchard, these are just unfortunate souls made victims by tragic circumstances that are inescapably human.

It's this that distinguishes *The Witcher*'s world from the high fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings*. Magic and the supernatural is subtle, not abundant. It makes The Continent a world we can all recognise: it's textured with sorcery, rather than defined by it.

So I keep coming back to Geralt's world, for all its grotesque battlefields and human defects, because it feels reassuringly like home. *The Witcher 3*'s world isn't perfect, and nor do I want it to be. The magic that ebbs and flows within it is a neutral force bound up with very real human impulses.

The problems that plague the world aren't my own, but, also, they are. The difference is that, by contrast to the intractable issues that beset the real world, which can make us feel helpless, these Geralt has the means to do something about. Hopefully, after hours faced with just about everything humans can do to one another, we learned something about the real world, and ourselves. ■

IT'S AN ENVIRONMENT THAT FEELS REAL AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, HUMAN, WARTS AND ALL



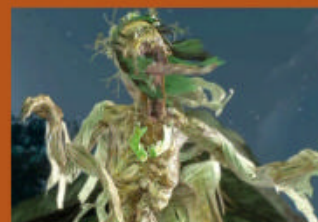
MONSTER HUNTER

Three of The Witcher's most tragic beings



BOTCHLING

Botchlings are deformed fetuses born from miscarried babies not given a proper burial. In Family Matters, you have the choice to either kill the being, or try to turn it into a kindly guardian spirit called a Lubberkin.



WRAITH

It's likely you'll hear one of these before you see them: They're known to scream in pain and linger in places special to them in life. These spirits remain due to a sense of being wronged, driven by an eternal anger.



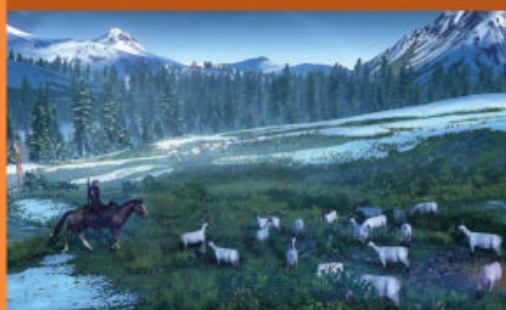
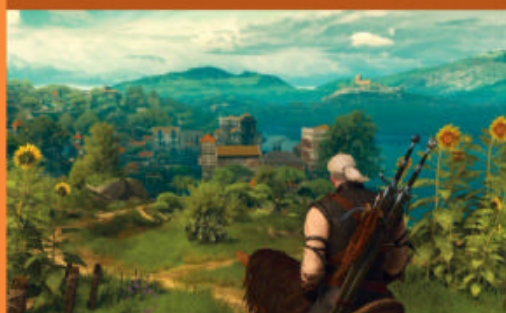
SIREN

These adept hunters are known to use their bodies to seduce sailors before killing them with razor-sharp talons. Legend has it they weren't always hostile: it's said that Sirens once accepted the courtship of men.

Escape Your World



Touissant's
Mediterranean charm
shrouds the darkness
beneath the surface.



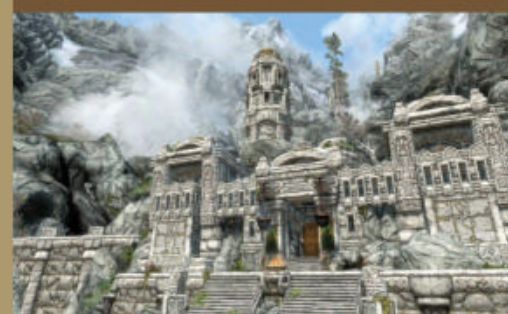
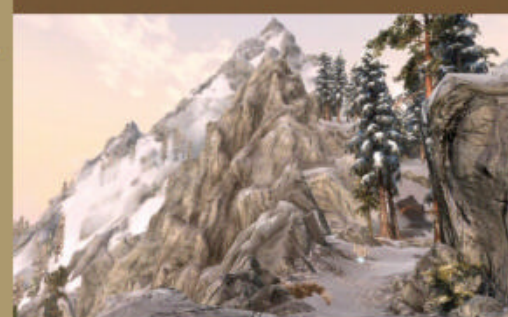
The world of The
Continent is
gorgeous, despite all
the horror and
violence.



Escape Your World



You *can* climb the Throat of the World, but it's much easier to fast travel.



Markarth: the most climbable city.

Peak Performance

Mountain climbing in **SKYRIM** is bizarre, but maybe that's a beautiful thing. *By Phil Savage*

Hereby, I offer my apology to every environment artist working in games, past, present, and future. How many hours do they spend creating lavish, gorgeous, massive open worlds? Hundreds?

Thousands? Huge teams spend years bringing to life spaces we could only dream of exploring – resplendent fantasy vistas and detailed historical reimaginings both. And how do I respond to this work? By running face first into a mountain.

My strongest memories of *Skyrim* are of being pressed against a cliff texture. Yes, it's a game filled with big moments – the dragon attacks, the dramatic battles, the fun sidequests discovered in unlikely locations – but

those are punctuations on a game that's often about simply travelling through an enormous world.

Less than an hour into a fresh playthrough, I'm rubbing up against the mountain west of Riverwood, trying to carve my own path to Bleak Falls Barrow in an effort to retrieve a golden claw stolen from a shop. There's probably a path that leads here – a painstakingly crafted and playtested route that will contain just enough adventure to make for a satisfying journey. And yet I've never found it.

Skyrim, like most RPGs, has a compass that points to your next destination. And me, like most idiots, treats that not as a helpful guide, but an absolute

beacon of truth. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Or, more often, a straight line that leads through a mountain that eventually becomes too steep to climb.

The trick to climbing in *Skyrim* is persistence. If a mountain cliff becomes impassable, keep going anyway. Keep moving forward, but tilt your mouse to the left or right to start sliding along the horizontal axis. As long as you keep holding the W key, you'll almost never lose vertical position. Eventually you'll start to see opportunities for gaining height – gentler slopes that yield greater elevation.

Am I ruining my own sense of immersion? Yes, but I'd argue that I'm doing so in a way that makes me appreciate the game even more.

It's tempting to think about escapism purely in terms of the fantasy a game is trying to depict. You're the chosen one, fighting back alone against the forces of darkness. You're the cowboy, railing against the greed and corruption of the civilised world. You're the truck driver, shipping essentials across the highways of Europe. But your lasting impression of a game is more than just the fantasy it's trying to sell. It's about the way you chose to play.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Games once held a sense of mystery and wonder. As a child, it felt like anything was possible in these rudimentary worlds. Eventually my knowledge of what games could do – what they could *be* – started to grow. Even as the worlds became bigger and more complex, the infinite possibility space closed in. While plenty of games surprise with their ideas and execution, I found that the sense of magic was lost. I used to think that was quite a sad thing, but I've grown to appreciate the relationship that forms in a work that's familiar and known.

There is no mystery left in *Skyrim* for me. I've played it for hundreds of hours. I've modded it. I've looked inside its editor to find out what makes it tick. And it turns out there's escapism in predictability and order. Our world is chaotic to the point of feeling random. The relationship between cause and effect is so cosmically vast as to be beyond human understanding. In games, though, it can be reassuring to see the edges of a world; to find the limitations of the simulation. If you know what a game can be – if you understand its rules and design – you can also create tricks to turn it to your advantage.

In games, you can run at a cliff until you reach the top. What could be more empowering than that? ■

IT TURNS OUT THERE'S ESCAPISM IN PREDICTABILITY AND ORDER

PEAK PERFORMANCE *Our favourite visual mods*



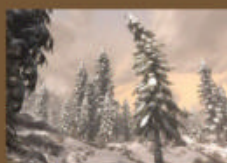
SKYRIM 2020

Part of a series of hi-res texture packs by Pfuscher. Install them all, if your PC can handle it.



SMIM

Improves the static meshes of many in-game items, improving the appearance of everything.



SKYRIM FLORA OVERHAUL

There's a lot of trees in *Skyrim*, so it makes sense to have them looking their very best.



VIVID WEATHERS

Weather plays a big part in *Skyrim*'s atmosphere, and this bundle lets you see some great effects.

Community Service

What makes **EVE ONLINE** wonderful is... you. *By Robin Valentine*

The reason space sim MMO *EVE Online*'s universe is so special – and enduring – is its relationship with its players. Thanks to an interwoven tangle of reactive systems, it's a sandbox that plays host to dynamic politics, economics, espionage and warfare on a grand scale.

Whether it's hitmen spending ten months undercover to bring down a rival corporation, or explorer Katia Sae embarking on a nine year journey to visit all 7,805 solar systems, or an enterprising pirate scoring loot worth \$60,000 in real money from one month-long raiding spree, it's a game that has spawned a thousand fascinating stories – with more arising every day. Check out more on its latest updates, including a full-scale alien invasion, over on p98. ■

Escape Your World



Diving In

ABZÛ's underwater ecosystem and streamlined swimming can make anyone feel at home in the ocean. *By Rachel Watts*

Underwater levels in games can make you flounder. Weird water physics, breath timers, and clunky character movements have historically made submerged worlds daunting. But Giant Squid's subaquatic adventure *ABZÛ* takes all that away, turning even the clumsiest of player inputs into the graceful movements of an aqua-dancer. It's an effortless, relaxing adventure that makes you feel totally at home in its aquatic world.

ABZÛ is a wordless story set within the depths of the ocean. You play as a diver who's helping restore life back to parts of the sea that are decaying. As you delve deeper, you'll begin to unravel the mysteries of an ancient civilisation and start to understand the diver's origins. The game has moments of quiet reflection, rushes of action, and playful interactions that use its underwater world to great effect.

The way you control the diver comes completely naturally as you start playing. Their movements are amazingly fluid, gracefully gliding through the water, elegantly twisting and turning to match the player's input. Any game that can turn my awkward and erratic inputs into a delicate ballet performance is something to treasure. This smooth movement not only makes it easier to navigate the space, it also creates a strong connection between the gliding of the diver and the ecosystem around you.

STOP AND SMELL THE KELP

Every corner of *ABZÛ* is bursting with life. There are some beautifully artful sequences, like being swept away by a school of bustling fish, playfully swimming with a pod of dolphins, or effortlessly gliding next to an enormous blue whale. But there are also moments where you're free to explore on your own, allowing you to stop and absorb the ecology.

'Meditation rocks' have been placed in the game's aesthetic sweet spots, letting you get an eyeful of its beautiful environments. *ABZÛ* is unusual in that it directly invites you to sit down calmly and just watch the activity around you. You're not treated as an enemy or outsider, you can sit on these rocks as long as you like – it's a welcoming gesture. Being swept through a beautiful environment is thrilling, but it's only when you stop and look around that you begin to see that the bustling ecosystem has a life of its own.

The fish and plants in *ABZÛ* have all been programmed to follow sets of procedural rules that

make them as life-like as possible. The world has vibrant energy because it's in a constant state of movement. The way the fish look, move, and interact is how they would in real marine ecosystem environments, making them captivating to watch. There are hundreds of different species to gaze at, each one having its own set of rules to follow. *ABZÛ's* world actually feels like it's a full simulation of a real-life ecosystem, contained on your screen.

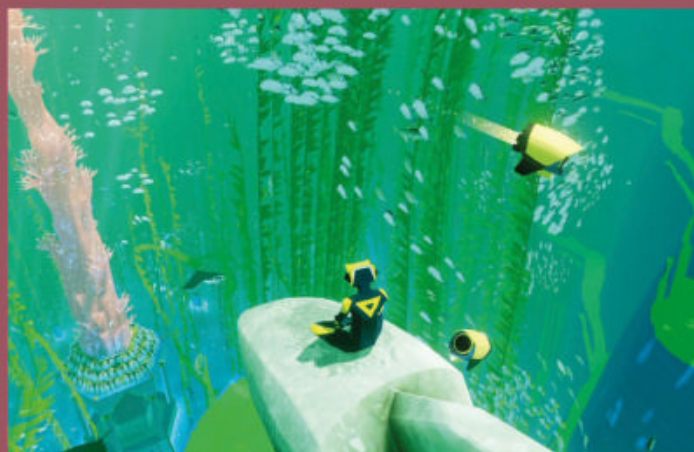
This thriving underwater community completely embraces you as every fish and plant directly responds to your movements. Trees of kelp will sway in reaction to you gliding through, and if you rush past a school of fish they'll disperse in a flurry of colour. Dolphins, manta rays, whale sharks, manatees, jellyfish, and more besides will interact with you in different ways. There's a sense you're directly influencing the world around you, and a strong connection is built.

This underwater empire makes you feel like you're a part of its world. It's the story of a diver discovering where they came from, but instead of telling us with words, *ABZÛ* makes you feel like you belong. It transports you to one of the few wild and mysterious places left on this planet, and embraces its strange and wonderful nature. You're not treated as a tourist but as part of its world – and for a little while, you feel at one with the ocean. ■

THIS UNDERWATER EMPIRE MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE A PART OF ITS WORLD

SCHOOLED *Learn the secrets of ABZÛ's fishy friends*

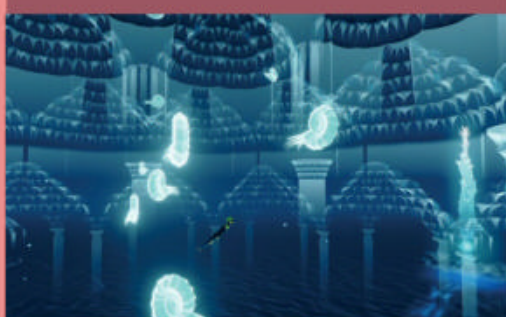
Meditation rocks are not only for a quiet rest but also inform the player of the different species they are looking at. The name of the fish appears at the bottom of the screen, and the camera switches from watching the diver to examining the fish, allowing you to look more closely. It's an intimate moment between the game and the player, letting you learn about the real-life species of the ocean.



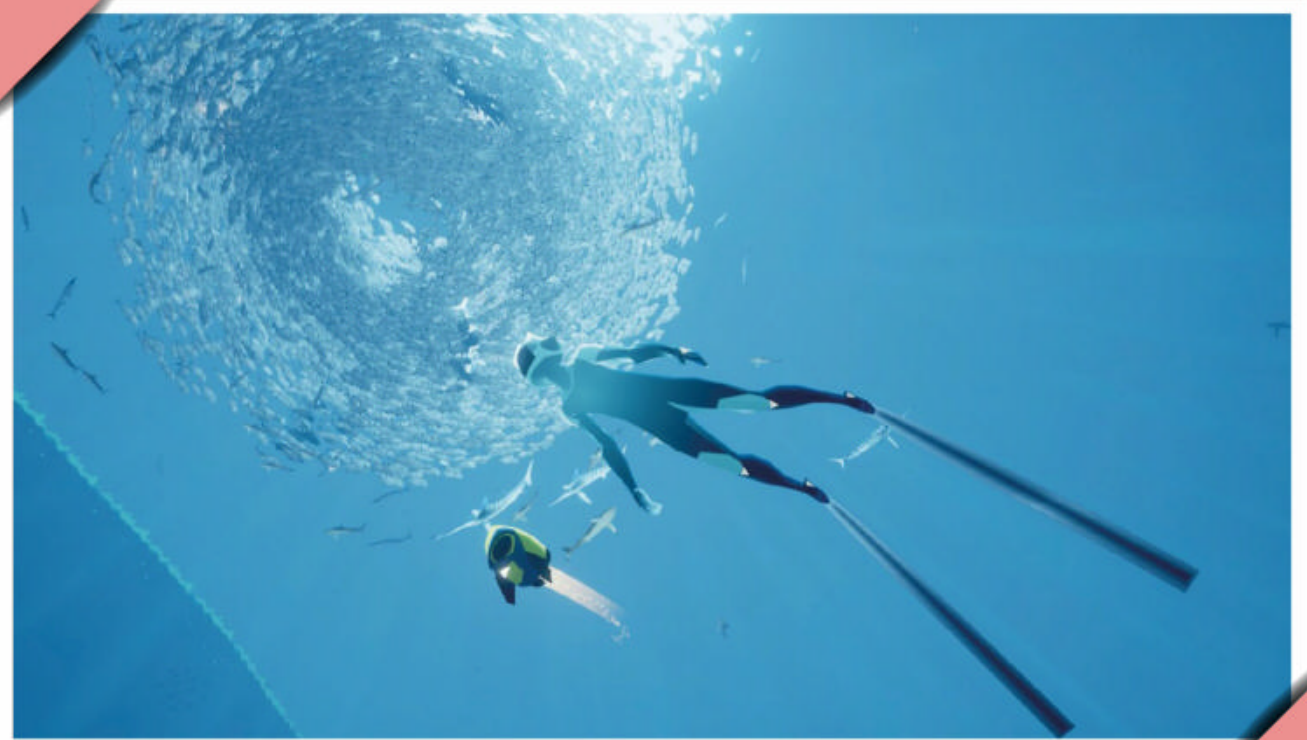
Escape Your World



ABZÛ's vibrant palette often leaves calm blues for other striking colours.



They're real fish species, but the game makes them feel fantastical.





Kabukicho is safer
than Kamurocho,
thankfully.



The real Dobuita
Street as it looks
today.

Dobuita is a historic
location in Yokosuka.





Rising Sun

From the city to the suburbs, **YAKUZA** and **SHENMUE** perfectly capture the minutiae of Japanese life. *By Andy Kelly*

It's interesting how two of the most atmospheric, detailed and well-realised worlds on PC – *Yakuza*'s Kamurocho and *Shenmue*'s Yokosuka – are among the smallest. Each game presents a painstakingly recreated, but economical, slice of Japanese life, rooting their fantastic stories of revenge and conspiracy in a lavishly mundane reality. In both games, a grimy Tokyo real estate office or a budget travel agent will have as much detail, if not more, as the story's more glamorous locations.

WALK THE STREETS OF KAMUROCHO AND YOU'LL HEAR MUSIC LEAKING FROM BARS

In the *Yakuza* series we explore a semi-fictionalised version of Kabukicho, Tokyo's infamous red light district; in *Shenmue*, the port city of Yokosuka. By the standards of most

games, these are small spaces. But by focusing on a few streets, rather than an immense, continent-sized sprawl, the developers of each game are able to flesh their worlds out with a much higher level of detail.

Walk the streets of Kamurocho and you'll hear thudding music leaking from bars and the deafening rattle of pachinko halls. Vending machines and an ocean of neon glow in the night, cats slink down alleyways and barkers try to lure passing salarymen into the district's endless rows of seedy nightclubs. Dense crowds of people roam the streets, and when it

rains the neon lights reflect in the puddles, filling the image with a vast variety of colour.

RECREATIONAL RECREATIONS

Yokosuka, located 40 miles south of Tokyo, is much quieter, with leafy suburbs and a shopping district, Dobuita Street. Here, every NPC follows a routine. Workers slurp ramen at lunchtime, shop owners pull their shutters down at night. It feels like a living community – and one that exists whether you're there or not. Kamurocho and Yokosuka couldn't be more different as settings, but they're similar in how they both focus on the small details that make a city unique, which creates a powerful sense of place.

At the tail end of 2019 I spent a few weeks in Japan, and as a fan of both *Yakuza* and *Shenmue*, I couldn't resist the urge to visit both locations for real. First, I took the subway a few stops from my downtown Tokyo hotel to Kabukicho. The moment I walked through its iconic red gates, I was stunned by how accurately the developers of *Yakuza* captured its essence. The hostess clubs, the endless neon, the convenience stores, the tiny restaurants... it all looked, sounded, and *felt* amazingly familiar.

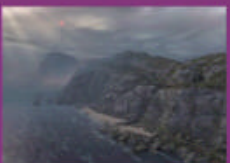
A few days later I took a train to Yokosuka. When I arrived at the station, I saw the port and a docked warship – a scene straight out of *Shenmue*. Half an hour later I'm walking along Dobuita Street, which has become something of a pilgrimage for fans of Yu Suzuki's game. It's set in the 1980s, so the modern version of the street is quite different. But it still has that small-town *Shenmue* feel, and I even saw some sailors. There's a big US Navy base nearby, and Dobuita is a popular shore leave hangout.

Of the two locations I visited, Kabukicho is the most like its videogame counterpart. Yokosuka has changed a lot over the years, although when I drifted away from the main street into the nearby suburbs, I could see more of the game as I walked between traditional Japanese houses.

I've always been impressed by the attention to detail in *Yakuza* and *Shenmue*, but experiencing these places for myself has taken that to another level. A lot of game worlds are all about the bigger picture, with grand vistas and dramatic scenery. But the beauty of these two games is how the micro is just as important as the macro. Neither of them have the extreme fidelity of a world from a big budget blockbuster game. But they arguably capture something more of the truth and essence of a place by taking the time to focus on the little things that make it special. ■

WORLD TOUR

Other games that nail the atmosphere of real places



DEAR ESTHER
Set in the rural Outer Hebrides, this narrative adventure does a great job of recreating the look and feel of a remote Scottish island.



WATCH DOGS 2
Watch Dogs 2 features one of Ubisoft's finest worlds. Natural lighting and fog bring this part of the USA brilliantly to life.



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE
Another game from the creator of *Dear Esther*, this time set in a fictional village in Shropshire.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
Walk along Venice Beach at sunset and you'll realise just how bang-on Rockstar's portrayal of the area really is.

Escape Your World

**VENDORS PLY
THEIR TRADE,
ILLUMINATED
BY THE GAUDY
LIGHT OF
NEON SIGNS**

New Tricks

Street fights and sight-seeing on Hong Kong's rain-slicked streets in **SLEEPING DOGS**. By Robin Valentine

When it comes to virtual tourism, it's hard to beat the atmospheric streets of *Sleeping Dogs*' Hong Kong. It's at once an authentic snapshot of a unique and historic city, and a kind of exaggerated martial arts flick soundstage writ impossibly large.

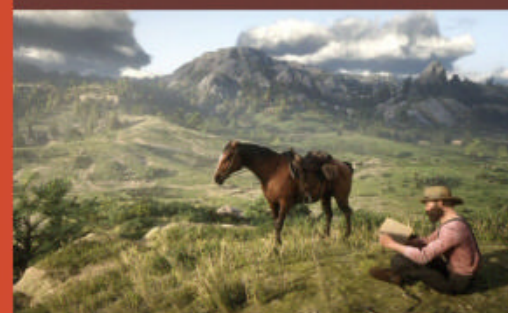
On hazy streets, market vendors ply their trade, illuminated by the gaudy light of countless neon signs above. Cars honk their way along clogged roads, towered over by forests of skyscrapers. A world gorgeous enough to simply stroll through, transporting yourself to another place – but also dynamic enough to sprint and leap across for yet another parkour chase, scattering crowds and plates of street-dumplings like John Woo doves. Not bad for a studio based in Vancouver, Canada, over 10,000 km away from the city it recreated. ■

Escape Your World



There's about a 90 percent chance I'm the one who killed whoever they're mourning.

Someday I'll find out where they take all the dead bodies I manufacture.



Extra, Extra

Slowing down to spend time with the minor NPCs of **RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2**. *Chris Livingston*

The most compelling open worlds are the ones that feel like they would exist even if you never visited them, and the key to that illusion is to fill the world with convincing people. I'm not talking about the main characters, the quest-givers, or the speech-makers. I'm talking about everyone else – the background extras that fill the gaps in the world, the ones you tend to barely notice unless you slow down and start paying attention to them.

I TAILED HER FOR A LONG TIME AS SHE RODE OVER HILLS AND THROUGH FORESTS

Early in my life as Arthur Morgan in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, I came across a woman being abducted. After killing her kidnapper and cutting her ropes, she thanked me and told me she was going back

home. She climbed onto the dead man's horse, then rode off. I followed her – not in a creepy way, I swear. I was just curious if she'd really go home, or if the game intended for her to just ride out of sight and de-spawn once I stopped watching.

I tailed her for a long time as she rode over hills and through forests, until she came to a town, turned down a few roads, then dismounted and walked into a house. I can't say for sure it was really her house, but the illusion at least held up to my scrutiny.

I started following a lot of NPCs around, and not just ones I saved from kidnappers, but anyone who seemed interesting. I'd follow farmers around as they

worked, carrying grain sacks and hay bales, examining livestock and jotting down notes, loading and unloading wagons. I love finding hunters out in the wild, who tell me to keep quiet when I ride over to them so I don't spook their prey. I follow them in a crouch, watch as they track their target, and then skin whatever they've killed before riding off again.

Even just hanging around in a town can be rewarding. One day in Blackwater gusts of wind were driving huge clouds of dust through the town, and many of the locals commented on the windy weather. If you misbehave and get into a gunfight with the local cops, the townsfolk remember that, too, chastising you about your behaviour the next time you visit. These may be randomly generated NPCs with no names and only a few lines of dialogue, but they still manage to feel real and persistent.

WHERE'S THE MORGUE?

Speaking of misbehaving, after a big noisy gunfight at Hanging Dog Ranch, a posse showed up to investigate and I bravely hid in the barn until I lost my wanted level. When I wandered innocently back outside – gosh, what happened here? – I saw lawmen loading the corpses onto their horses. I tailed one to see where he took it, though I lost him when a thunderstorm rolled in and I got attacked by a bear. After another gunfight, this one at Ridgewood Farm, I again tailed the posse to see where they'd bring the bodies they carted off. After long minutes of following, I got attacked and killed by some bounty hunters. Someday I'll figure out where they take all those corpses I keep piling up!

These minor characters aren't made perfectly, of course. I rescued a man from some bandits after his wife flagged me down on the road. After I killed the bandits and untied the man, he thanked me and said he was going to find his wife, who had run off. So I followed him, hoping to see their reunion. He just sort of rode around on trails for a while, but at one point when I got close to him he suddenly turned and said, "Do I know you?" Well, yes, you do, I shot two men in the face to save you five minutes ago. But he seemed to have forgotten me, and possibly forgotten his wife, too, their marriage the victim of a script that ended before they could reunite.

That's OK, though. Even if they don't always lead me somewhere interesting, I still really enjoy following *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s NPCs around. They make the world feel less like a beautiful painting and more like a real place. ■

TRY THESE *Four other games with great minor NPCs*



ASSASSIN'S CREED: ORIGINS
The extras are just as finely detailed as the world itself. It's fascinating to simply watch people go about their day.



THE ELDER SCROLLS 4: OBLIVION
They may not look like much, but some are skooma addicts, adulterers, or even evil cult members.



GTA V
The citizens of Los Santos are rude, crude, and prone to both panic and violence. They're also creative with their profanity.



HITMAN 2
The perfect game for watching NPCs walk around, because you absolutely need to learn their routines. How else can you steal their clothes?

Grimdark Goofs

DARK SOULS II's anything-goes take on bleak fantasy makes for a wonderfully memorable world. *By James Davenport*

Many fervent *Dark Souls* fans have written off *Dark Souls II* as an accident. But, in the words of Bob Ross who'd no doubt look over Medula with a tear in his eye, the sun setting over an endless sea, bathing the ruins of a once proud civilisation in golden light: it's a happy accident.

Dark Souls II has all the 'serious' series staples, of course. There are ruined castles, dead kings, piles of lore implying terrible histories of avarice and sorrow. But in contrast with those expectations, *Dark Souls II* folds in endless absurdity, humour, and creativity, particularly in its boss design. This is a grim fantasy world, but it's one that never takes itself too seriously, which is why I remember more of *Dark Souls II* beat-by-beat than any other game in the series.

There's the Executioner's Chariot boss, a horseman led by spectral horses that races around a coliseum. He's the kind of bad guy you'd see painted in the window of a pop-up Halloween costume store. Scorpioness Najka is a scorpion centaur with two tails, because the character modeller was hungover that morning or something. The Demon of Song is a huge, blind frog that pukes out the desiccated face of a corpse the size of a party van and waves around two weird stick figure arms like whips.

There's a massive spider boss whose ass is just another spider. You fight a dragon in a big, ramshackle bird cage. The Skeleton Lords boss is a cage match with dozens of skeletons, some wielding scimitars and scythes, while Bonewheels pinball around the arena. When I think about it too hard, I can almost hear the designer's lips curl up in a malicious smile. They knew the reputation those things had in the first game. They knew about our trauma.

The Smelter Demon's face puckers like an asshole propped on top of the comically large pauldrons of a Warhammer orc. Mytha, The Baneful Queen is a Medusa analogue that throws her disembodied head at you like a petrify-inducing hand grenade. Royal Rat Authority is a buff, towering rat that cuts the silhouette of a direwolf, and functions as a cheeky visual nod to *Dark Souls*' infamous sword-wielding wolf, Sif. Remember that handsome guy? Well, now he's covered in shit. But you only fight the Authority after earning the right in combat, by defeating a tiny swarm of much cuter mice called the Royal Rat Vanguard. We're only inches away from grimdark Redwall fan fiction here.

CROWN JEWEL

Then there's the *Crown of the Ivory King* expansion, where you fight a dead king's old pets, including an invisible snow tiger. It's also where some of the best *Souls* level designs conceits are tested and, sadly, left behind. You'll pass through the level going one way, then again after unfreezing enemies and pathways, transforming the whole scene on the fly. And hidden within those new pathways are Loyce Knights, some undead fighters that'll come in handy very shortly.

Because next up is the expansion's final boss, which might qualify as the most metal shit From Software has ever done.

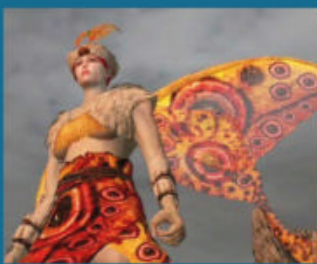
Pass through the fog gate and you drop hundreds of feet into a swirling, fiery chaos dimension, with up to seven Loyce Knight comrades at your side. What follows is an arena fight, team deathmatch, in hell. Total chaos.

The anything-goes nature of *Dark Souls II*'s fantasy imagery means it brushes up against familiarity more often. The game's pants ripped and its Dungeons and Dragons are showing, but frankly it couldn't care less. It's straight up exhibitionism, playing the Grim Fantasy role so fast and loose that it almost feels like a goofy dungeon master is making up *Dark Souls II* on the fly, imagining wild, surprising monsters that force a wry grin at the end of every surprised scream. From Software has made more cohesive worlds, but none so unreservedly fun. ■

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN ARENA FIGHT, TEAM DEATHMATCH, IN HELL. TOTAL CHAOS

BEST DRESSED

Dark Souls II also features the series' best fashion by a mile



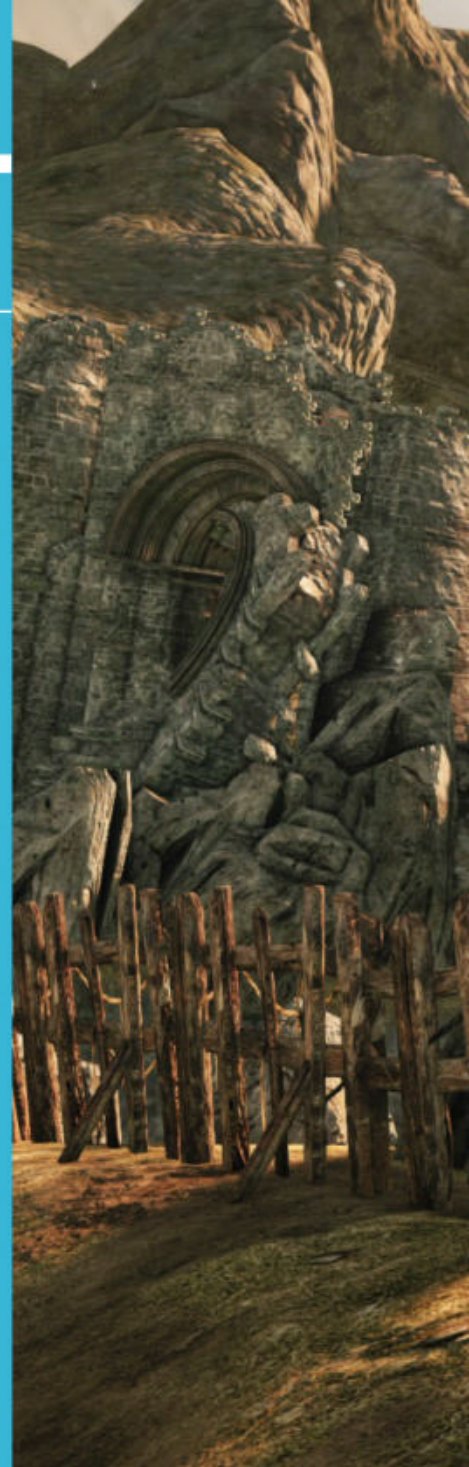
MOON BUTTERFLY WINGS
These gorgeous wings buff your jump, too.



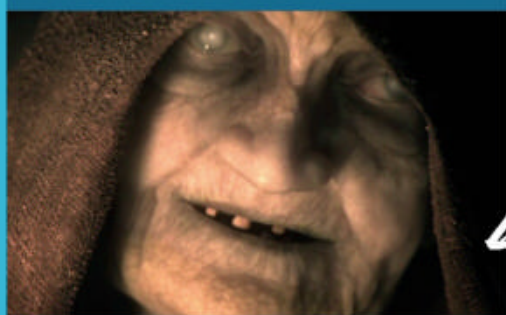
MASTODON LEGGINGS
If you have thighs for miles, go with these elephantine leggings.



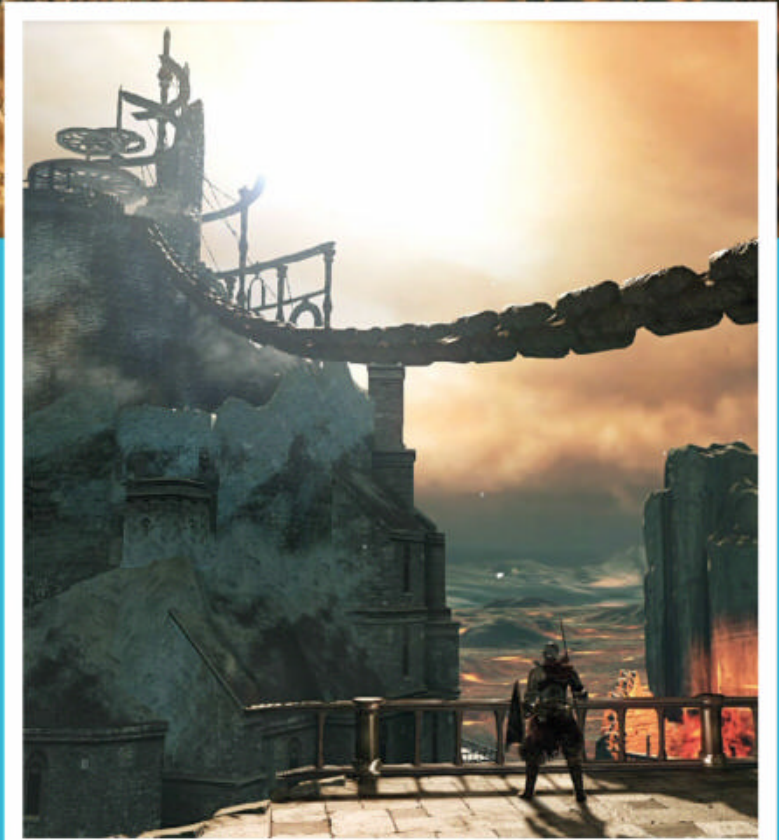
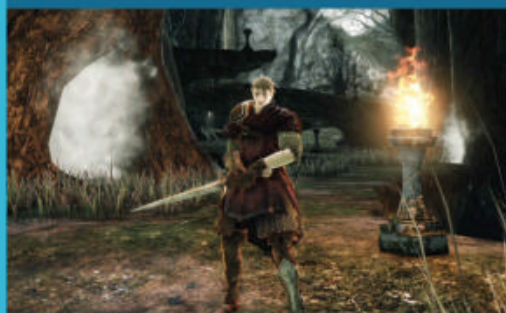
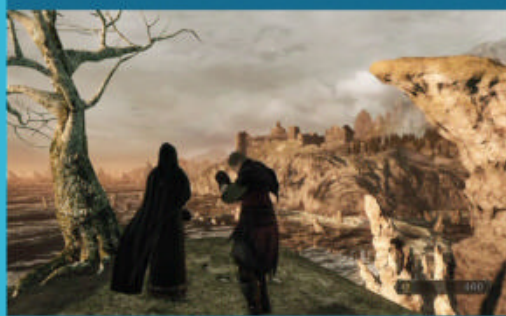
JESTER'S CAP
They'll stop laughing when you show off your newfound riches. Raises item discovery.



Escape Your World



This old firekeeper's maniacal laughter sets the tone straight away.



The game's hub world approach was a controversial change at the time.



Escape Your World



The Scandinavia expansion is one of the biggest.

There are dozens of licensed trucks for you to drive.



One of thousands of roadside details.



Road Trip

EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2 is quietly one of the best open world games on PC – and it's always growing. *By Andy Kelly*

When you think about open world games, your mind tends to leap to *Assassin's Creed*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and all the other big hitters of the genre. But you might be surprised to learn that one of the best, biggest, most varied, and constantly evolving open worlds doesn't belong to a blockbuster third-person action game with a mega budget; it's the setting for *Euro Truck Simulator 2*.

Longtime readers of PC Gamer will know we love SCS Software's trucking sim. It's one of the best driving games on PC, with weighty, nuanced handling and fun RPG elements. And since its release way back in 2012, the game's map has been steadily growing. It now

includes a huge chunk of Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Italy, France, and soon, Spain and Portugal. It's even possible to drive as far as Turkey and parts of eastern Russia. And you can do it seamlessly, without any intrusive loading breaks.

It's a colossal map, and even though it's not exactly to scale, getting from one end to the other can take a while. I recently drove from London to Turkey, retracing the route of the Orient Express, and it took almost five hours. And I was amazed by how varied the scenery was as I crossed each border. You really do feel like you've gone on a long, albeit massively condensed, road trip across a continent.

In a single journey you can take in the lush farmland of southern France, the dramatic mountain

passes of Norway, Italian coastal roads and, less excitingly, the rain-soaked motorways of the UK. The beauty of *ETS2* is that it's realistic, and for every beauty spot there are miles of uneventful roads to navigate. But these long stretches of concrete only make the moments when you do see something eye-catching even sweeter.

KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

And there's something compelling about those long stretches of road, which means even the 'boring' bits of the journey are worthwhile. *ETS2* is a game a lot of people play to relax, and listening to the radio as the road unfurls before you is strangely calming. Especially when it rains and you watch your wipers swishing back and forth. This open world is unique in that a lot of it is observed passively as your mind drifts to other places, hypnotised by road.

SCS is a small team, but its dedication to getting the details right is impressive. A good example of this is how police car markings and road sign typography are accurate to whichever country you happen to be in. And it's doubly impressive that the artists mainly use Google Maps as reference. Alas, not everything is accurate. Drive to Glasgow and you'll see sunflowers by the motorway, which is wishful thinking.

What makes *Euro Truck Simulator 2* special is how travelling across its world actually feels like a significant, lengthy journey. In *GTA V* you can drive from Los Santos to the desert in five minutes – enough to create a sense of scale, but still a reminder that it's a condensed space. But when you haul cargo from one capital city to another in *ETS2*, there's a real sense of covering ground, of moving across a vast landmass. And as it gets bigger with each expansion, this sensation only grows stronger. ■

MAP QUEST

How ETS2 has grown over the years



GOING EAST
Released: September 20, 2013
Added Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary



SCANDINAVIA
Released: May 7, 2015
Added Denmark, Norway, Sweden



VIVE LA FRANCE!
Released: December 5, 2016
Added France, Corsica



ITALIA
Released: December 5, 2017
Added Italy, Sicily, Sardinia



BEYOND THE BALTIC SEA
Released: November 29, 2018
Added Finland, Russia and more



ROAD TO THE BLACK SEA
Released: December 5, 2019
Added Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey



IBERIA
Released: TBC 2020
Will add Spain and Portugal

Escape Your World

**EVERY MISSION FELT
LIKE A REAL JOURNEY,
WITH ALL SORTS OF
DIVERSIONS**

Take it Slow

In **ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS**, it's about the journey, not the destination. *By Robin Valentine*

F

ast travel is ubiquitous in open world games. I get why – it's a time-saver in an industry more packed with massive games than ever. But I think it also undermines the scale of these virtual realms.

More and more I find myself swearing off using it completely. Riding across the dunes of *Assassin's Creed Origins*, I experienced so much more of a genuine sense of place than I would have zipping around the map. I came to learn the geography and its landmarks, and every mission felt like a real journey, with all sorts of diversions and twists along the way as I stumbled into other events and sidequests.

Give it a try, next time you pick up an open-world epic. It's definitely not the speediest way to play, but it's the best path to a true virtual escape. ■



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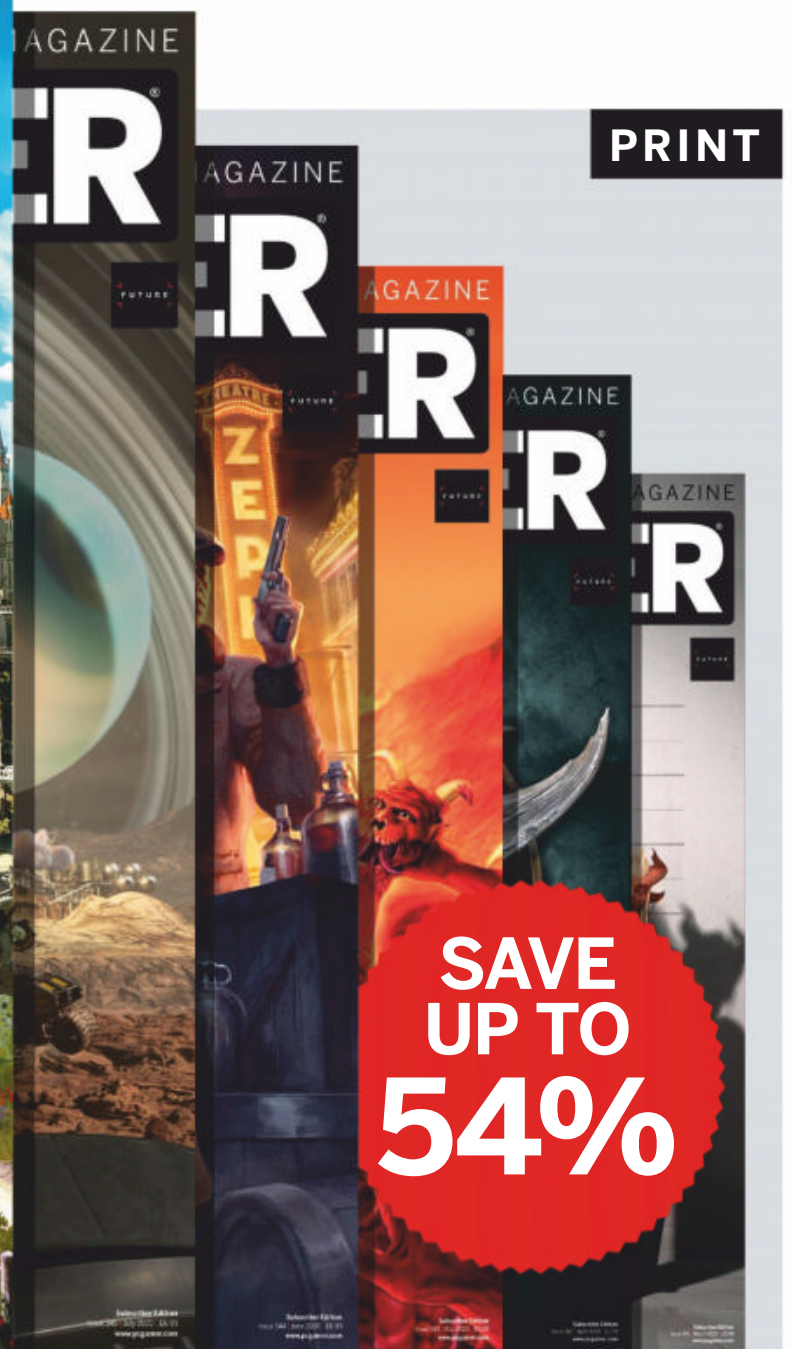


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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Flopped

Back in 2014, Amazon announced it was stepping into the world of games, with a whole suite of multiplayer titles across every then-trendy genre. Over the six years since, most have been cancelled, but this month sees the launch of *Crucible*, a hero shooter in the mould of *Overwatch*.

Amazon is the biggest company in the world. Its CEO, Jeff Bezos, is the richest man alive. This month, its first major game release came out to zero fanfare, almost no marketing, and (spoiler) critical derision. At time of writing, the player base is so low that the developers are making plans to scrap two of its three modes. No one is streaming it on Twitch, a platform Amazon owns.

All of which is to say, even with all the advantages in the world, no one is too rich or too powerful to fail. So don't be too hard on yourself for your mistakes. Jeff won't be.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's brick-breaking reviewers...



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
The square-cube law
Currently playing
Minecraft Dungeons
This month
Became the *Minecraft*
world's merciless,
soul-drinking Grim
Reaper.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Shark week
Currently playing
Maneater
This month
Destroyed a boat, and a
bigger boat, and then
an even bigger boat...



JODY MACGREGOR
Specialist in
Staff training
Currently playing
Monster Train
This month
Discovered a form of
public transport more
hellish than the Tube.



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Peeker's advantage
Currently playing
Crucible, Valorant
This month
Checked out both hero
shooters put out by
huge studios recently.
Which is best? Um.



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Diggin' it
Currently playing
Deep Rock Galactic
This month
Discovered innovative
new ways of getting
lost in a procedurally
generated asteroid.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Underwater jump
scares
Currently playing
Swallow the Sea
This month
Learned about the
life cycle of the ocean
bubble-baby.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Choke-slammings
awful wrestling games
Currently playing
WWE 2k20
This month
Wrestled with bugs,
clunky, systems, and
bad dialogue.

BREEZE BLOCK

MINECRAFT DUNGEONS is a lightweight dungeon crawler that keeps the sandbox's playful humour. *By Rachel Watts*

I'm in a dark crypt, surrounded by skeletons and creepers. I'm blasting mobs with my firework arrows which explode into a cloud of colourful sparks, dual-wielding sickles that freeze enemies, and harvesting the souls of the fallen to power my laser cube that obliterates everything in my path. Throughout this whole spectacle, the llama I've summoned keeps charging head-first into mobs in a throw of spitting rage. It's ridiculous, and I'm enjoying every second.

It's safe to say that *Minecraft Dungeons* doesn't take itself too seriously. It's set in the same universe as its sandbox predecessor, but there's no crafting or building in his world. It's a dungeon crawler that challenges you to furiously hack-and-slash your way through hordes of enemies with an arsenal of fun enchantments and items. I've cleaved a swathe through hordes of slime cubes, shot a mass of burning (and exploding) arrows at spiders, and gone toe to toe with sinister, teleporting Endermen. It's bombastic, frantic fun, and it offers four-player local or online co-op so your friends can get in on its blocky brawls too.

The story is fairly straightforward. The main villain is the evil Arch-Illager who finds a powerful artefact called the Orb of Dominance and

seeks revenge on those who shunned and bullied him. He's gathered an army of familiar *Minecraft* foes to take over the world, and your party must stop him. Occasionally you'll be tasked with freeing captured villagers

as a challenge within a level, but the story is mostly just a reason for mindless brawling. Although, it does have a grand Lord of the Rings-inspired narrator who introduces the goal of each level – a nice touch.

The world of *Minecraft Dungeons* has been given a glorious glow up from its sandbox counterpart. There are a handful of different biomes for you to choose from, including woodland, mine, swamp, temple and canyon areas, each with their own loot drops and enemy types. One of my favourites is Fiery Forge, where glowing red lava cascades into the

The story is mostly just a reason for mindless brawling

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A simple dungeon crawler set in the *Minecraft* universe

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Mojang Studios

PUBLISHER
Mojang Studios

REVIEWED ON
i5-2500K, 8GB RAM,
GTX 670

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
minecraft.net

lower layers of the level. It looks amazing against the blue-infused iron walls of the forge.

It's also refreshing to see *Minecraft*'s world from an isometric perspective. In another level, Redstone Mines, you can peer down the mine shafts and watch pulleys lift out the glowing Redstone, giving the level a great sense of depth and character. *Minecraft Dungeons* catapults the blocky world to new heights. It's like looking at *Minecraft* with a load of visual upgrade and ray-tracing mods on – with the bonus that it won't fry your computer.

HIP TO BE SQUARE

The graphics look even better during the bombastic combat. You'll be dodging exploding Creepers, sidestepping incoming fiery arrows, and rolling away from potions lobbed by wizards that unleash a haze of purple poisonous smoke. Stir in enchanted weapons and powerful artefacts and battles are a frantic mess of vibrant colour and explosions. It's bonkers.

Minecraft Dungeons also has a cheeky sense of humour, inherited from its sandbox sibling. Arrows comedically stick out of enemies like they're pin cushions, and keys that unlock doors spring legs and try to run away when you're attacked. There are even mini Creepers that rush you and gnaw at your knees. The Illagers have even kept their curious nasally greeting that will be a familiar sound for *Minecraft* players.

Although each level is procedurally generated, there's always a clear pathway with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore. Each level has its own mini-dungeon or crypt if you're hunting for extra loot, and some levels even have hidden secrets to new areas or special weapons. You're also given map markers at the edge of the screen to show where your goal is, a bottomless healing potion with a 30-second cooldown, and three lives. With this generous toolset, Mojang has focused

IT'S DINNERTIME

The items you'll need to make the Soul Eater build

1 SOUL ROBE
A special piece of armour that collects all the delicious souls.

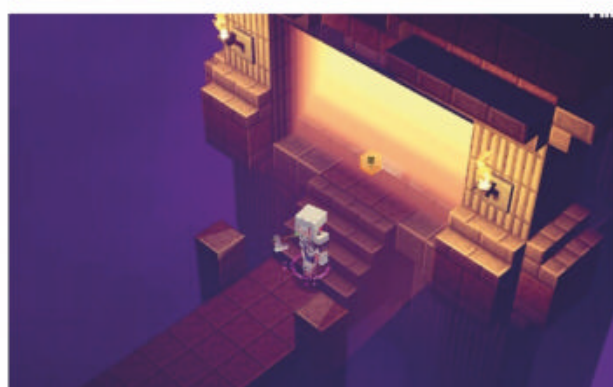
2 SOUL SCYTHE
How can you harvest the souls of the dead without a good ol' scythe?



3 CORRUPTED BEACON
A cube of immense destruction that uses souls to unleash a high-powered beam.

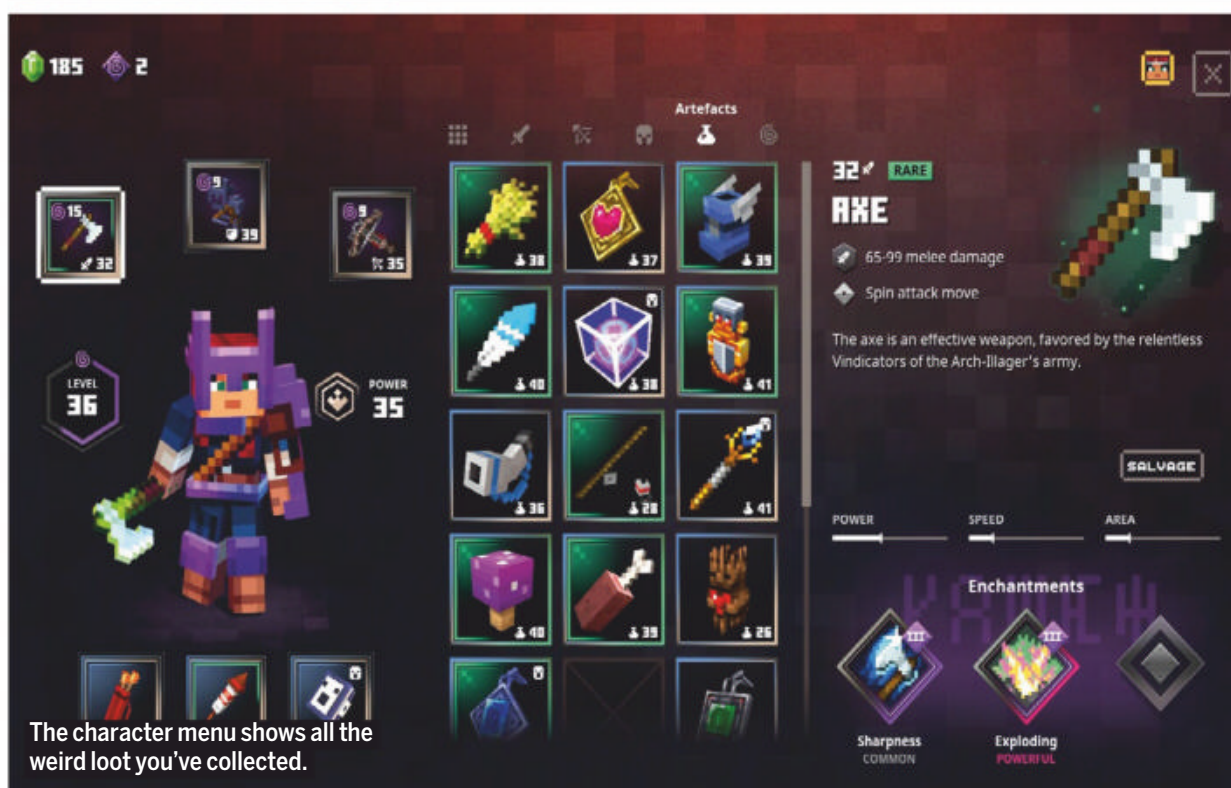
4 HARVESTER
A tome that siphons souls and then releases them in a circular blast.

Having friends to back you up in brawls is always good fun.

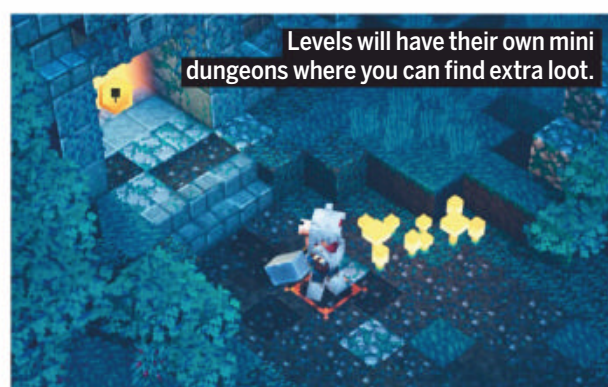


My cow teammate is taking a backseat in this fight.

FIND THE TEMPLE
THE DISTANT TEMPLE



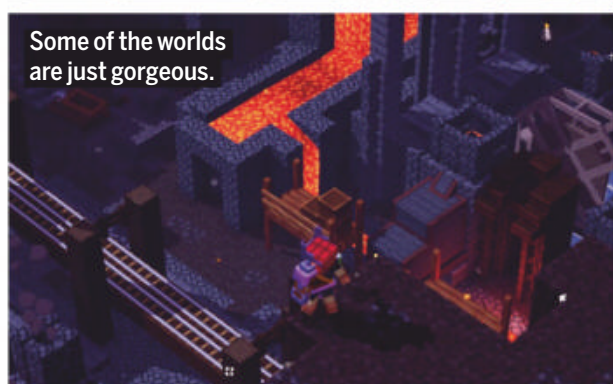
The character menu shows all the weird loot you've collected.



Levels will have their own mini dungeons where you can find extra loot.



Some of the worlds are just gorgeous.



Sometimes animals get caught in the crossfire, and it fills me with incredible guilt.



» on fun and spectacle rather than tactical challenge.

Strategising and theory crafting are great, but charging in headfirst and hacking and slashing through a monster-filled cavern has its own charm. With only a handful of levels, you'll be repeating the same runs a lot, but it's more for finding an item you missed or a hidden secret than tedious grinding. Finishing the campaign, from tutorial to final boss, took me a handful of hours.

Each level also comes with a threat slider that lets you adjust how easy or hard it is. The slider will start on a recommended difficulty based on your character's power and, in my experience, it's been pretty spot on. The first half of the campaign is pretty breezy but the latter half definitely requires more attention to artefact and potion use. The final level is pretty dramatic, set during a raging storm as you ambush the Arch-Illager's castle.

If you wanted more of a challenge you can push it up to make mobs beefier and more difficult to defeat. But if you and your friends want to mindlessly block-break through levels you can move the slider down for a more breezy experience. The threat slider is also a great addition for younger players who might be coming off the back of *Minecraft*. I mostly kept to the recommended difficulty, but on occasion I would put the threat slider up just to get more powerful weapons, although it would often end with me being quickly sent back to camp, bloodied and bruised.

Unlike the classes and skills you would find in *Diablo* and other action-RPGs, your character's abilities come solely from the gear you choose. You have room for a melee weapon, ranged weapon, and a piece of armour, and every item can be upgraded with enchantment points. Each item has a unique set of enchantments attached to it, which you can activate with your points. You might find the same item multiple times, but each one will have different abilities.

Enchantment points are pretty valuable in *Minecraft Dungeons*, and are only gained when you level up, so to stop players hanging on to weapons they've spent all their points on there's a 'salvage' system. If you

MONSTER MASH

Some familiar enemies that you'll be brawling with:



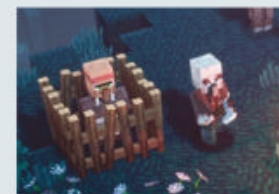
ZOMBIE
The classic *Minecraft* undead mob. Still very slow and break easily.



ENDERMAN
A teleporting weirdo who has long spindly arms that are not for hugs.



REDSTONE GOLEM
A big chunky dude that loves lava but hates fiery arrows to the head.



ILLAGERS
The ones in the cages are good and the ones attacking you are bad.

were to spend all your enchantment points on a piece of gear only to find a better one down the line, you can salvage your original weapon and get the points back to spend on the new one. This helpful recycling system gives you the freedom to try out new gear and fun abilities without fear of nerfing yourself.

Alongside weapons are artefacts that give you ability bonuses like fire arrows and passive healing. They can be in the form of healing totems, magical amulets, or items that let you summon animal allies. With the right selection of enchantments, weapons, and artefacts, you can put together a pretty powerful character. A build I'm currently rocking is my 'Soul

Eater' build that harvests all of the ghostly souls of my fallen enemies to use them as a resource to power my artefacts.

A handy feature is the ability to switch out and salvage items on the go, shifting your

build to effectively deal with whatever threat you're up against. As an example, that Soul Eater build is great for large mobs with lots of tasty souls, but against a one-versus-one boss battle, it's useless. My go-to for bosses is 'My Body is a Temple' build made from artefacts and enchanted weapons that rejuvenate my health quickly, letting me bounce back after some brutal blows. There's enough variation in the loot available to allow for plenty of experimentation.

BLOCK PARTY

I've played a lot of *Minecraft Dungeons* solo, but its chaos is best experienced with a group of friends – four blocky killing machines are always better than one. Players can easily drop in and out of each other's

sessions, and Mojang has made it so that all the loot you find in multiplayer is yours to keep, meaning everyone gets their own fair share of the goods. The feeling of going back to camp, looking at your loot, and seeing everyone completely rebuild their characters is fun. The ease of playing with friends and its breezy nature makes *Minecraft Dungeons* a perfect co-op pursuit. Its multiplayer shenanigans feel more in keeping with the *Lego* games or *Castle Crashers* than *Diablo*.

Minecraft Dungeons is the perfect introduction to dungeon crawlers for beginners, and a breezy adventure for veterans. It doesn't have any really standout ideas or gimmicks, but it's a fun, streamlined take on the genre. There's little complexity – no intricate systems to delve into or epic battle plans to be mapped out – so if you prefer an action-RPG to have plenty of depth, then it's likely that you'll be disappointed.

Although it doesn't have *Minecraft*'s crafting and building there are still plenty of ways to be creative. Building a character through carefully selected items and choosing which enchantments to activate is *Dungeons*' own kind of crafting. It's taken the rigidity out of dungeon crawling systems, in favour of a constant state of experimental flux.

It's likely that Mojang is planning to expand the world of *Minecraft Dungeons*. With a mysterious upcoming 'Island Realms' option on the overworld map and a curious empty portal, it seems there will be much more to come. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Minecraft Dungeons is a chill and simple dungeon crawler that reproduces *Minecraft*'s playful attitude perfectly.

75



SHARK WEAK

Repetitive tasks take a big bite out of the fun in **MANEATER**. By Chris Livingston

I've lost track of how many people I've eaten. My mission was to consume ten golfers, and since people don't golf in the ocean I had to jump out of the water and shimmy my way onto the golf course to start chowing down on them. Three patrol boats filled with gun-toting shark hunters appeared, so I ate them, too. I'm probably up to about 17 humans eaten now, though I still need to eat three more golfers to finish my gory quest list.

More hunters in patrol boats and on jetskis arrive so I consume them too, along with a few divers. And then a celebrity shark hunter appears, flanked by several escort boats. It's Candyman Curtis, important enough to warrant his own introduction in a cutscene. I leap from the water, snatch Curtis from his boat, and swallow him in a few bites while I swim away. Defeating a human in a boss fight is no big deal when you're a goddamn shark.

Sharks only do three things, according to Matt Hooper in the 1975 film *Jaws*. They swim and eat and make little sharks. In *Maneater*, Tripwire's action-RPG, you just swim and eat (and sometimes bellyflop onto a golf course), which doesn't sound like enough to propel you through an entire open world RPG. And, unfortunately, it isn't. There's a lot of appeal in growing from a little shark to a hulking leviathan, but there's just not enough variation in the things you do along the way.

Defeating a boss fight is no big deal when you're a goddamn shark

Eating ten of something – humans, turtles, fish, seals, other sharks – is initially fun. Humans scream, animals struggle, blood fills the water and coats beaches and boats. Thrashing your shark's head by wiggling the mouse back and forth while holding your prey quickly reduces them to a cloud of chum. But doing it again and again and again (and again), the gruesome novelty wears off quickly and it just becomes a mindless exercise.

NO FIN ALLOWED

There are quests to kill single large predators, too, like a gator, barracuda, or a fellow shark, and more difficult battles against apex predators like an orca in a *Sea World*-like arena and an ancient sperm whale based on Moby Dick. But combat and enemy AI in *Maneater* is pretty sloppy, and I eventually abandoned careful evasion and timed strikes when I discovered that just spamming my attacks worked far better.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action-RPG where you are a hungry shark

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Tripwire Interactive

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3etRfJ3

The rest of *Maneater* is all collectible-style activities: find every hidden landmark, every sunken crate of drugs (helpful for mutations), every giant spinning licence plate (because in *Jaws*, a shark ate a licence plate, see). These same activities are repeated in every new region you visit, and that's mostly what you do in *Maneater*: swim around looking for collectibles to check off your list while eating 10/10 various creatures when told to.

At least the progression gained from these repetitive tasks freshens things up a bit. You can earn evolutionary mutations to cover your body with a bony exoskeleton and use a powerful battering ram attack, which was my go-to choice for smashing boats to pieces and torpedoing into enemy sharks. But the shadow mutation set, which gives you a vampiric health-leech ability and a handy poison attack, can only be unlocked by completing a tiresome checklist task.

There's still a lot I love about *Maneater*. The environments are wonderfully detailed and a pleasure to examine in the few quiet moments between chewing through the same-y quests on your checklist. The look of your shark is fantastic, too – each little upgrade you make to her body results in her looking more and more like some sort of awful demon shark from a horror film. Which to be honest is basically what you are to all those hapless golfers.

It's just a shame the journey from guppy to megashark monstrosity isn't populated with a wider variety of activities to occupy your time. Like Hooper said, sharks just swim and eat, and that's unfortunately not enough to fill even a short action-RPG like *Maneater*.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Although *Maneater* looks great, the fun of being an eternally hungry shark snacking on people wears off quickly.

65

ANIMAL CROSSING

Five other games where you play as a non-human



UNTITLED GOOSE GAME
Even the deadliest shark can't compare to the most annoying goose ever.



GOAT SIMULATOR
GTA-like destruction, but instead of a gangster with a car, you're a goat.



SHELTER
Play a badger mom trying to protect her tiny cubs from dangers like forest fires and hungry predators.



FUGL
Soar around a beautiful voxel sandbox as a bird who can sometimes turn into, what else, a flying monkey.



BLACKSAD
You're a cat man. You solve mysteries. In New York City in the 1950s. Need I say any more?



LIGHT MY PYRE

MONSTER TRAIN is a card game from Hell. *By Jody Macgregor*

Hell is empty and all the devils are here. By here I mean on this train, teaming up with monsters to fight angels across the frozen wasteland that used to be their home, until they reach Hell's heart and relight it with the last Pyre-flame. Surprisingly, the game beneath that wild idea is a deckbuilder so similar to *Slay the Spire* if I hadn't seen the creators of both talking chummily on a livestream I'd have been a bit suspicious.

Where *Slay the Spire* had relics that changed the nature of a run, *Monster Train* has artefacts that sometimes have basically the same abilities. *STS* had unlockable difficulty levels called ascensions, *Monster Train* calls them covenants. I found myself not minding the lack of originality, though. It feels like playing a sequel that builds on its predecessor's ideas.

But it does have its own quirks. Instead of choosing a hero with their own deck, you pick two clans, combining their cards like colours in *Magic: The Gathering*. Some of these clans are charmingly odd, like the Melting Remnant (living candles) – though others, such as the Awoken (plant people) are a little uninspired.

And each battle takes place over four levels of your train – three platforms where you summon monsters and a pyre at the top that has to be protected. Packs of angels enter at the ground floor and any you don't kill march up a level.

Like every deckbuilder, the point of *Monster Train* is to discover combos. My one successful run with the Hellhorned clan relied on a cheap imp who gave 15 points of armour to whatever it was summoned behind,

which I upgraded with the 'endless' trait so it could be summoned over and over, then set off with a card that let me sacrifice an imp for a mana point. I repeatedly summoned and detonated that imp behind a champion I'd

upgraded with a slay ability – every time he got a kill his attack power increased. By the end of each round he'd have an obscene amount of both armour and attack, dealing hundreds of points of damage each turn.

When you find a combo like that in a deckbuilder you feel like you're cheating, like you've sneakily broken the game. It's a fun feeling. In *Monster Train* you quickly reach bosses with hundreds of hit points and powerful debuffs, then realise you haven't cheated the game at all.

Like every deckbuilder, the point is to discover combos

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelite deckbuilder on rails

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Shiny Shoe

PUBLISHER
Good Shepherd

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
themonstertrain.com

You've done the bare minimum to play competently.

Between battles the train tracks split, each path taking in several points of interest. One path might let you upgrade spells, heal your pyre, and purge two cards from your deck. The other might let you upgrade units, score free money, and duplicate a card. Duplicated cards keep whatever upgrades you've put on them, which is one path to those obscene combos.

RAILROADING

Even more than other deckbuilders, *Monster Train* encourages lean decks purged of the chaff you start with, so your best combos go off every turn. The way to play isn't to discover a combo halfway through your run and adapt to it, instead you have to plan one from the beginning and then build towards it with the right upgrades. You even get told in advance which variation of the final boss you'll be facing so you can modify your plans.

That can make the randomness even more frustrating. There are three upgrade paths for each clan's champion, but you're only offered two of those paths per run. Any run where the Hellhorned champion doesn't get the slay ability from the off is one I abandon, because I've never made either of the others work.

Circling back to *Slay the Spire*, its rhythm of stumbling across powerful combos by chance feels more elating when it works, and has more tension when it comes down to the line.

Monster Train is a lower dosage of the same hit, though it scratched the same itch for several enjoyable hours and the first couple of covenants, and is an easy recommendation for *Slay the Spire* devotees. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A deckbuilder by the numbers that will have you doing hit point mathematics, and actually liking it.

77

HELL YES These cards will find a place in your heart and/or deck



RAILBEATER
Pushes back tanky enemies, exposing the fragile ones to your champion.



HOARFROST EFFIGY
Frostbite's damage-over-time effect is devastating.



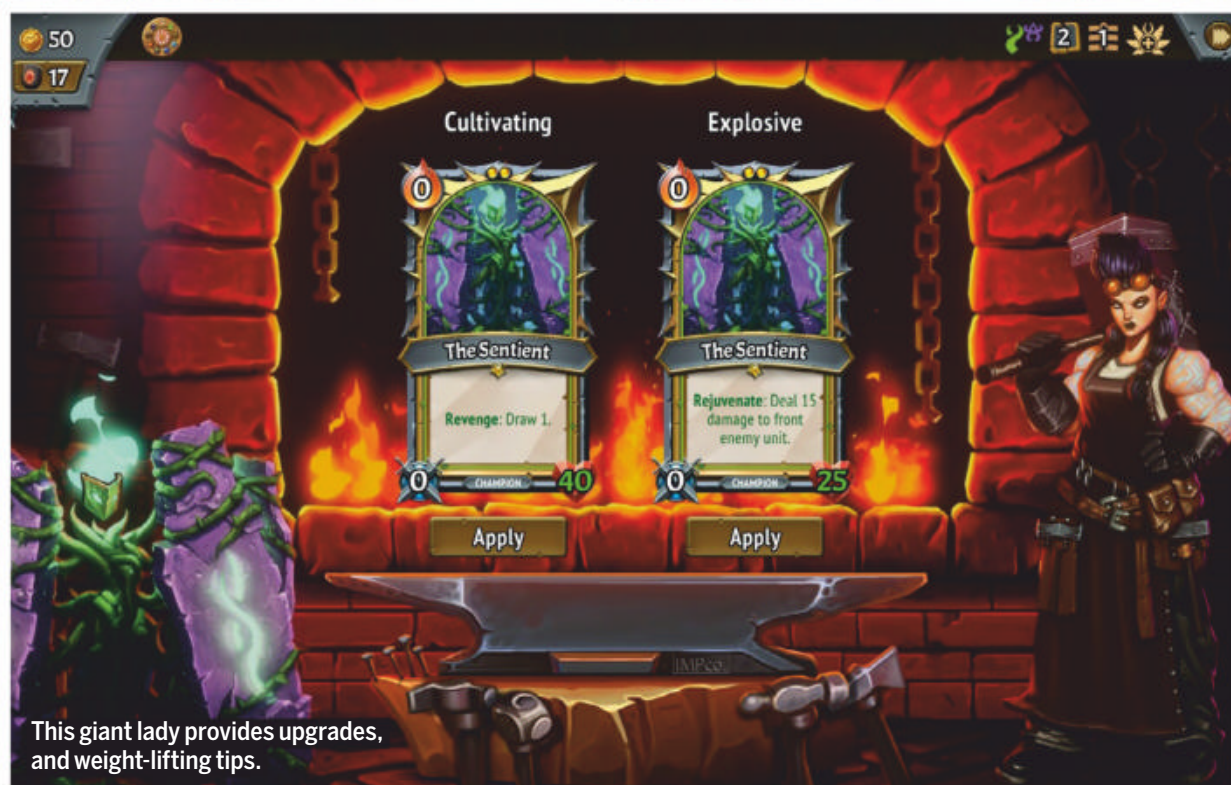
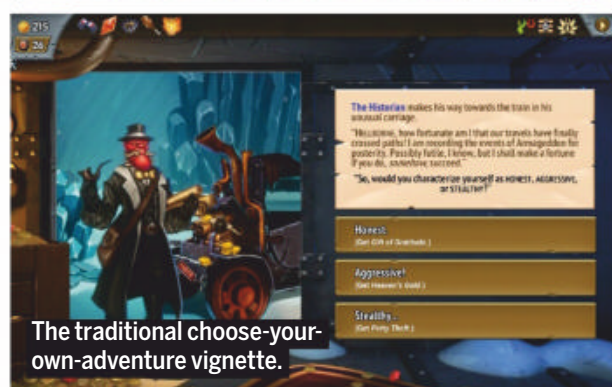
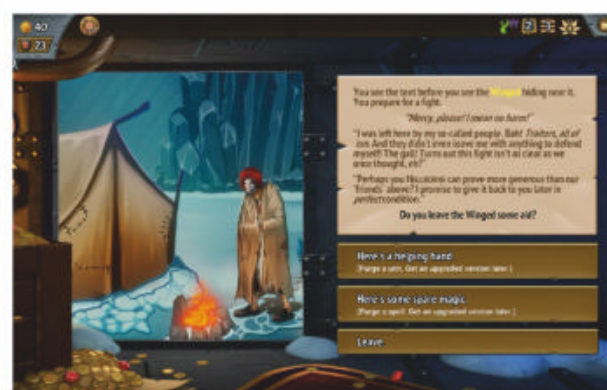
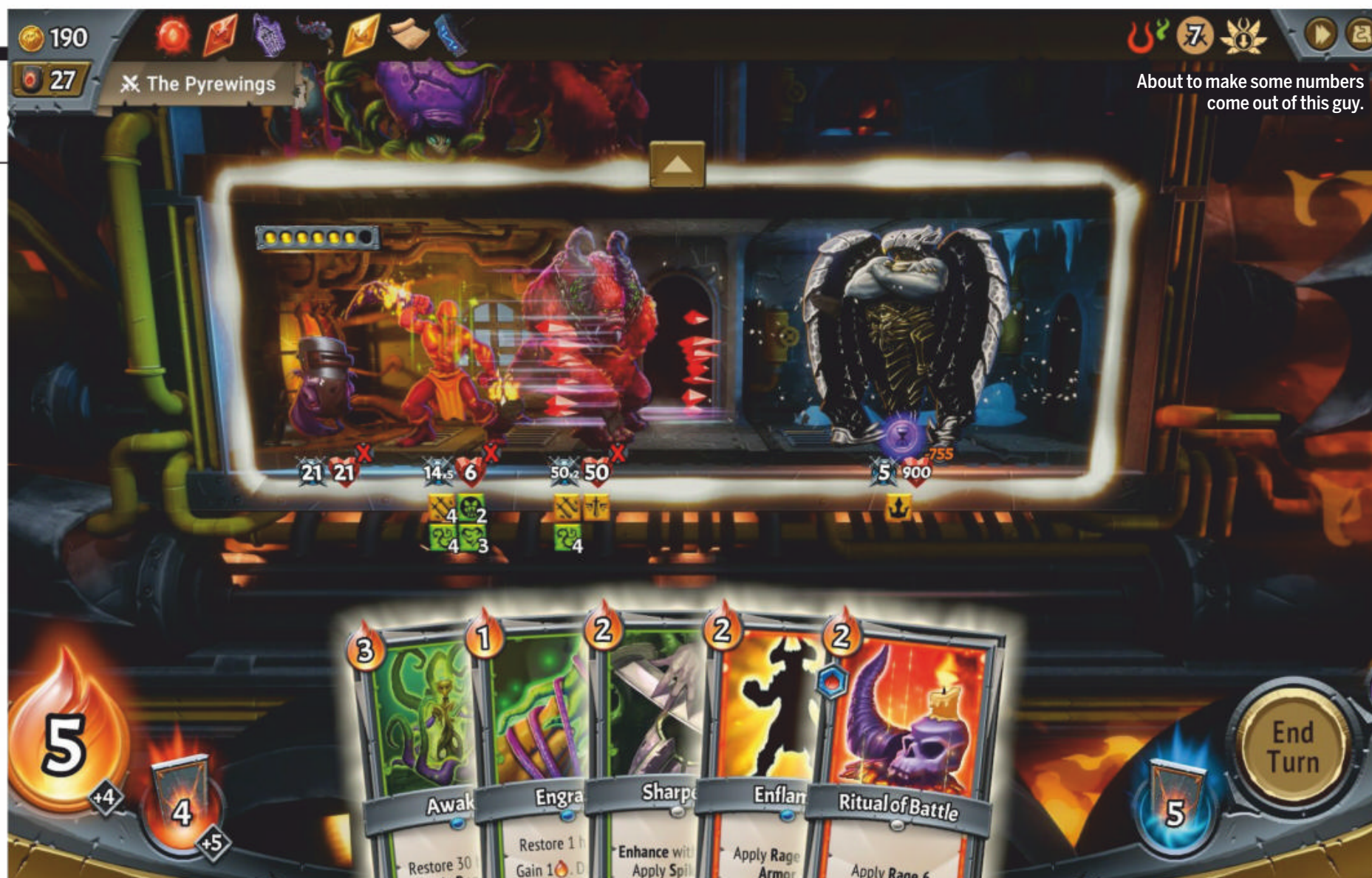
FEAST
Lets the Umbra power up by eating morsels before combat.



RESTORING RETREAT
Move a unit down a floor while healing them significantly.



BATTERING RAM
Turns armour into damage – suit up, then destroy.



SUB-PRIME

Not even **CRUCIBLE**'s adorable botanist robot can redeem its boring gameplay and poor frame rate. *By Morgan Park*

Checking all of the boxes needed to fit into the service game climate *Crucible* has: a roster of heroes with diverse abilities, cosmetics, a battle pass with dozens of progression levels, and snippets of lore that suggest a larger world. Unfortunately, it wraps these familiar elements around a competitive third-person shooter that isn't very good. Even for a free-to-play game, I can't find a reason to stick with its boring combat and spotty performance.

So much of *Crucible* feels like a misguided effort, starting with its game modes. Heart of the Hive is a 4v4 race to farm Essence (experience points) and be the first to collect three hive hearts. Efficient farming is the best way to out-level opponents and get an edge in fights, but it's so boring that I can't blame most of my teammates for screwing around instead of aiming for the objective.

I had a bit more fun in *Crucible*'s duos-only 18-player battle royale mode, Alpha Hunters. The map still feels too big for the number of players, but the action does tend to kick off faster than Heart of the Hive. There's also a neat twist – players that have lost their partner can offer to partner up with enemy players and reform a duo on-the-fly. It's a useful gimmick that can alleviate the typical BR scenario of trying to play out a round solo after quickly losing a teammate.

Miniguns sound like they're shooting marbles

When big teamfights break out in Heart of the Hive or Harvester Command (a 8v8 conquest-type mode), it's not worth the wait. *Crucible*'s combat is sluggish and the gluttony of explosion effects are hard to read up close.

Imposing assault rifles and miniguns sound like they're shooting marbles. Neither NPC or players react to taking damage, something that totally kills the impact of Drakahl's big axe and

Shakirri's sword.

Since most weapons are only effective at mid-range and movement is slow, every shootout becomes two people staring at each other holding left click, each trying to drain the other's massive health bar first.

Tactically, there aren't many options to get out of an uneven fight. Some heroes' movement abilities are quick enough to briefly disengage, but other players can just as quickly use theirs to chase you down and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person competitive hero shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Relentless Studios

PUBLISHER
Amazon Games

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2060, Ryzen 5 2600 3.4Ghz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playcrucible.com/en-gb

finish the job before you can recover. With nobody to heal up allies and few options to dodge incoming damage, fights are determined by which team has the higher numbers.

ROLE PLAY

Despite plenty of MOBA-adjacent mechanics like cooldown management and levelling, *Crucible*'s lack of roles is a deliberate choice. Developer Relentless Studios wants to avoid the downsides of hard-defined roles that *Overwatch* players know too well. I respect the goal, but *Crucible* is role-free in name only. Earl, a minigun-toting space trucker with high health, is a de facto tank.

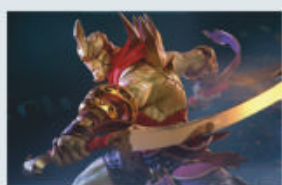
It's a shame that *Crucible* isn't more fun, because most of its hero designs are so clever. I particularly love Bugg, a sweet little botanist robot that plants flowers to attack enemies and can crop dust an area with poisonous gas. I appreciate Sazan's loadout that requires her to switch between her rifle, shotgun, and throwing knife in order to reload.

One of my biggest roadblocks with *Crucible* has been inconsistent performance. On my RTX 2060 and Ryzen 5 2600, the game struggles to hang around 50 fps with settings on high. Before I updated my graphics drivers, the average was closer to 30 fps. This performance doesn't really square with *Crucible*'s level of detail. It looks good, but not that good.

Crucible at its best isn't compelling enough to wait around for it to get better. There's potential in its creative heroes, but my enthusiasm falls flat as soon I have to play with them. There are too many shooters out there that do what *Crucible* does better. That's a big problem for a competitive multiplayer game, even at the low price of free. ■

AMAZON MAKES GAMES NOW?

Yep, Amazon has had its own gaming division since 2012. Don't worry, I forgot too. After seven years of making mobile games exclusive to Amazon's app store, PC and console games seem to be its new focus. *Crucible* is the highest-profile game to come out of the studio, but that may change with Amazon's upcoming MMO, *New World*.



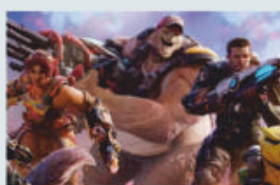
BREAKAWAY (CANCELLED)

A multiplayer brawler that unfortunately never saw the light of day.



THE GRAND TOUR GAME (JAN 2019)

The official video game adaption of the Amazon Prime TV show.



CRUCIBLE (MAY 2020)

A disappointing hero shooter. Read more about it on this page!



NEW WORLD (AUG 2020)

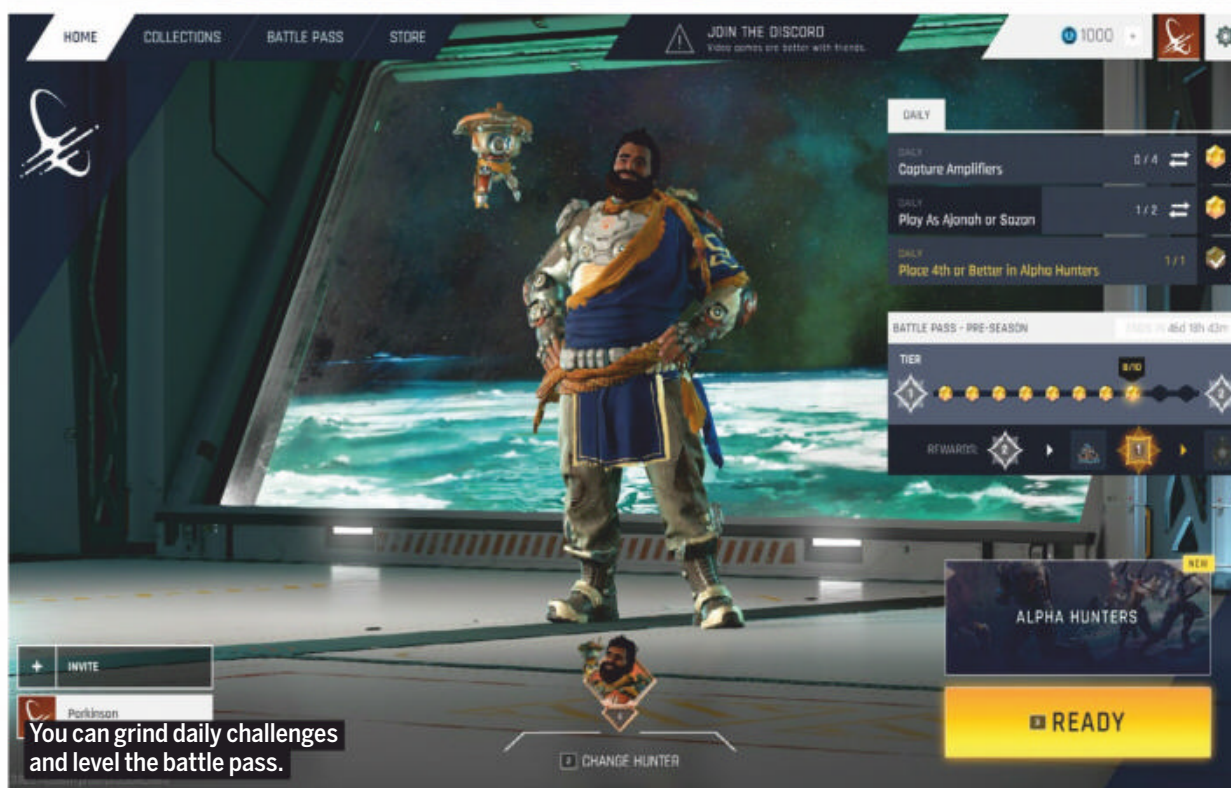
An MMO with active combat and an ambitious 17th century setting.

PC GAMER VERDICT

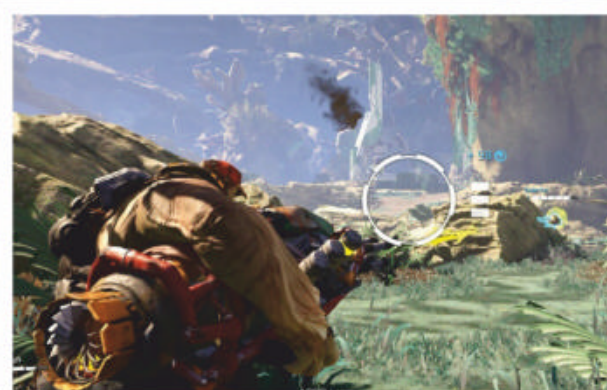
Despite some cool heroes and a neat twist on battle royale, Amazon's hero shooter wasn't worth the wait.

48

Players can somewhat modify upgrade paths to tune their playstyles.



You can grind daily challenges and level the battle pass.



Quietly farming monsters in a cave is always a sound strategy.



Rahi uses his little robot Brother to teleport across the map.



The battle of who can hold left click the longest!

DIGGING FOR VICTORY

Hunt bugs and haul mud in
DEEP ROCK GALACTIC. By Phil Iwaniuk

You've no doubt heard that *Deep Rock Galactic* is like *Left 4 Dead*, if Valve's co-op classic swapped zombies for alien arachnids and took place exclusively in dark, confounding tunnels. That's more or less accurate, but *Deep Rock Galactic's* eponymous depth is more than just environmental. The breadth of approaches possible here makes *Vermintide 2* look like *Desert Bus*, and frankly it's all a bit much for the first few hours.

An opening tutorial mission does a fantastic job of conveying the basics, though – this is your pick, use it to hack away at valuable minerals and carve tunnels. Right. Cool. Shoot the gun on the bad spiders – with you there. Call the M.U.L.E. to you and deposit mined resources, press 3 to equip a zipline launcher and 4 to toss a shield. Mine the required materials, dump them in the M.U.L.E., call for evac, then make it out before the dropship leaves without you.

This all makes sense within the confines of a friendly dummy run to get you up to speed, and in fact depicts a brilliant gameplay loop that you wish featured in other four-player first-person co-ops. I want *Vermintide 2* to steal that brilliant dynamic shift of having to rush your way back out through a level, racing against a very stern time limit and raising the stakes to absolute failure if you don't make it out in time. I wish there was more of *Deep Rock*

Galactic's resource harvesting and persistent upgrades to *Left 4 Dead*. And asymmetrical class-based co-op is always a treat when it's balanced this thoughtfully.

It's a fascinating proposition, and

Ghost Ship Games deserves the dedicated fanbase they've found through Early Access by marrying such demanding elements as destructible scenery, class-based co-op, and procedurally generated cave networks. That's

Ghost Ship Games deserves the fanbase they've found

not to say it's much fun for a newcomer, though.

No, for a newcomer the gameplay loop is less about mining, fending off waves of acid-gobbing spiders and then legging it to evacuation in a heroic final act, and more about periodically getting lost, trying to make sense of the, admittedly cool, low-fi 3D map, and making it back to your team-mates where you'll spend a golden one or two minutes feeling like part of the mission before becoming lost again.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Left 4 Dead meets *Minecraft* in deep space

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Ghost Ship Games

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain Publishing

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, RTX 2080 TI

MULTIPLAYER
4-player co-op

LINK
deeperockgalactic.com

ROCK STARS

What encourages you to persevere is the sheer ingenuity of other players. The experienced ones, who've been down in these caves since *early Early Access*, have a knack for turning befuddling topography into fairground rides with three ziplines and some well-placed pick-holes.

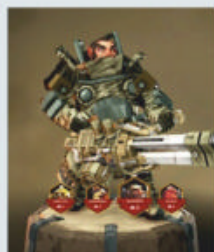
The division of labour between *Deep Rock Galactic's* four classes makes the spectacle of player ingenuity all the richer. In the same way you'd just stop and admire a particularly nifty sentry spot or tele placement in the early *TF2* days, the engies here really show their worth with some well-considered defensive structure placements.

Having taken point on a wave of enemies during one particular mission down the Crystalline Caverns as a Gunner and repelled the brunt of the assault alone, I returned to the Morkite vein we'd hit on minutes earlier. During my brief diversion, the driller had carved a genuinely ornate staircase into the rock wall allowing access up there. Moments like that keep you playing *Deep Rock Galactic*.

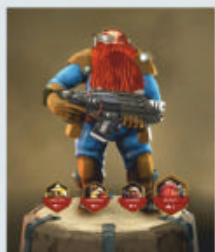
All of which begs the question: does it work as a solo game? And the answer is a resounding 'sort of'. When you embark on solo missions, you're given a shooting, reviving drone buddy, Bosco, and he's pretty competent down at the coal face. With him you don't feel there's something *missing* when by yourself.

Solo or with fellow humans, *Deep Rock Galactic* is as much a game about learning the hard way and reaping the rewards as it is about dislodging alien terra firma. As such, it's in danger of having many players simply bounce off it, but the hardcore who remain are rewarded with Mariana Trench levels of depth. ■

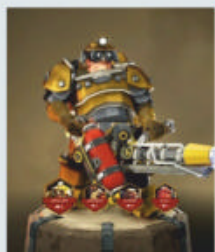
LABOUR FORCE *Doing the job with a touch of class*



GUNNER
Guns things. Handy when the waves of mobs arrive, surly the rest of the time.



SCOUT
Fast and good at lighting up caves. Worse at gunning than Gunners.



DRILLER
When a hand pick won't do it, it's the Driller's time to shine. And drill.



ENGINEER
Geniuses whose defensive turrets and structures save the day.

PC GAMER VERDICT

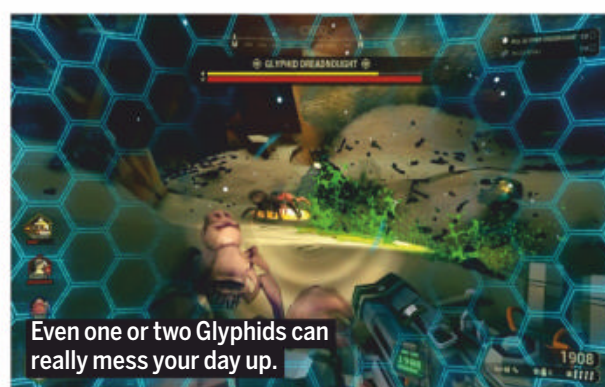
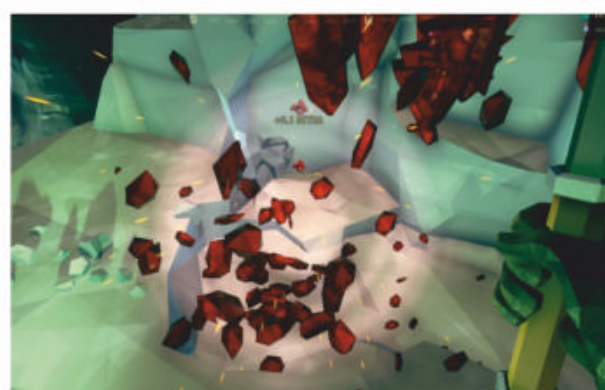
A clear and distinct spin on four-player co-op FPS with atmosphere, ingenuity... and real navigational problems.

79

Most enemies are arachnid in nature, but several variants mix it up with their attack types.



Without all party members making use of their flares, most caves are nearly pitch black.

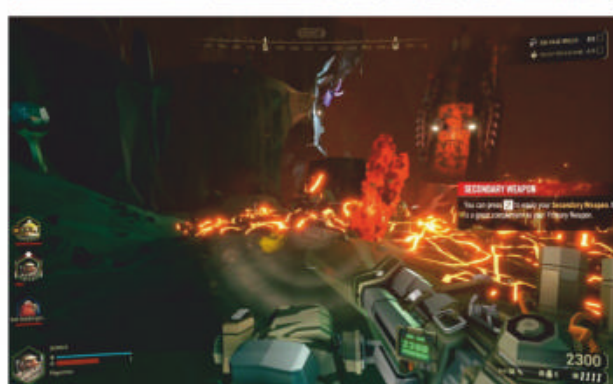


Even one or two Glyphids can really mess your day up.

The sprint to the escape ship is intense.



Oppressors have electrified attacks. Do not, under any circumstances, meet one.



COUNTER-SPIKE

Fresh ideas and playful abilities prove that **VALORANT** is way more than a copycat. *By Morgan Park*

It's wild how quickly *Valorant* has captured the collective consciousness of FPS fans. Riot's competitive shooter is just barely out of beta, yet it already stands toe-to-toe with the biggest games in its genre. It helps that *Valorant* comes from a gigantic studio and that its deviously smart partnership with Twitch streamers to selectively hand out beta access gave it a running start. But that enormous marketing push wouldn't mean much if *Valorant* weren't also very good.

It's true that *Valorant* is Riot's best crack at *Counter-Strike*, but the ways it remixes Valve's blueprint are what make it excellent. Anonymous gangs of counter-terrorists are replaced by a cast of vibrant agents with talents that match their

personalities. It has the same upbeat vibe of *Overwatch* that helps every loss feel a little more friendly.

Valorant manages to reproduce *Counter-Strike*'s greatest qualities while tossing magical ice walls and drones into the mix. The deliberate detachment from reality allows traditional support tools like smoke, flash, and fire grenades to become playful abilities with varied uses. It's been especially cool to see Sova's tricky recon arrow that players can bank off walls become its own art form.

I love the ways Riot has found to add value to the team beyond clicking on heads, but a few powers don't gel with its lethal combat. Striking a balance between *Overwatch* – where accuracy feels secondary to a well-timed ult – and *Counter-Strike*'s purist weapon jousting is a difficult feat. Sage, *Valorant*'s only dedicated support, feels massively overpowered at launch. As *Valorant* adds more agents, any fluctuations on this scale could alienate or agitate players.

Players who haven't spent triple-digit hours in *Counter-Strike* might find *Valorant*'s shooting a significant hurdle. Remembering to stand still before shooting is an ongoing adjustment for me. Some intrinsic CS mechanics, like the weapon economy and Buy Phase, feel under-explained. *Valorant* lacks

onboarding for basic strategies like save rounds, playing for picks and bomb placement.

Most of *Valorant*'s 16 guns are bland-looking replications of *Counter-Strike* guns with a few additions like the Shorty sidearm shotgun. *Valorant*'s aim-down-sights on primary weapons and random recoil sway fly in the face of *CS:GO*'s recoil patterns that can be perfected. I much prefer the emphasis

Valorant places on positioning for the weapon you're carrying.

The only area where *Valorant* feels a bit shallow at launch is its map

Valorant is the more accessible Counter-Strike I didn't know I wanted

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Counter-Strike*-style FPS from the League of Legends studio

EXPECT TO PAY
Free-to-play

DEVELOPER
Riot

PUBLISHER
Riot

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2060, Ryzen 5 2600 3.4Ghz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playvalorant.com

pool. There are four maps so far. It's slim pickings, but I appreciate the variety in layout and style. Riot says it wants each map to feature something "new and unique" – Bind has portals that connect the two sites, Haven's mid is a third bomb site, Split has climbing ropes, and Ascent (the new map) has one-way metal doors.

For the most part, *Valorant*'s map design succeeds at replicating *Counter-Strike*'s carefully considered sightlines and chokepoints. It'll take months for the community to fully evaluate each map's strengths and weaknesses, but I'm having fun wherever I end up. I'd wager that Riot is afraid of overwhelming new players with too many maps.

PAY UP

A few of *Valorant*'s weapon skins can be earned in the \$10, 50-tier battle pass. Others will need to be bought outright. Nothing stands out as nickle-and-dimey compared to other free-to-play games, but we're still talking about \$70 bundles that have a handful of skins. Unlocking agents is another story. Everyone starts with Sage, Phoenix, Jett, Brimstone and Sova for free. The rest need to be unlocked through Contracts or bought individually for \$10. Whether that's reasonable or not will be up to your microtransaction tolerance.

Valorant is the more accessible *Counter-Strike* I didn't know I wanted. Abilities add an intoxicating dynamism to every round and expand the scope of teamwork for this style of FPS. I'm interested to see how new agents and maps keep things fresh. Even if unlocking its full roster is a major grind and cosmetics cost a bunch, *Valorant* is a great team game that you can play right now without spending a dime. ■

KNOW YOUR WEAPON

The guns and their CS: GO equivalents

VALORANT



Sheriff

Expensive pistol with high damage and even higher recoil. A risky pick for pistol rounds.



Vandal

A powerful rifle with lots of recoil. Knocks down enemies with a single headshot



Phantom

High fire rate rifle that's easy to control, but lower damage than the Vandal/AK.



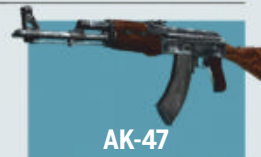
Ghost

Silenced pistol that's useful for one-shot-headshots against unarmored enemies.

CS:GO



Desert Eagle



AK-47



M4A1-S

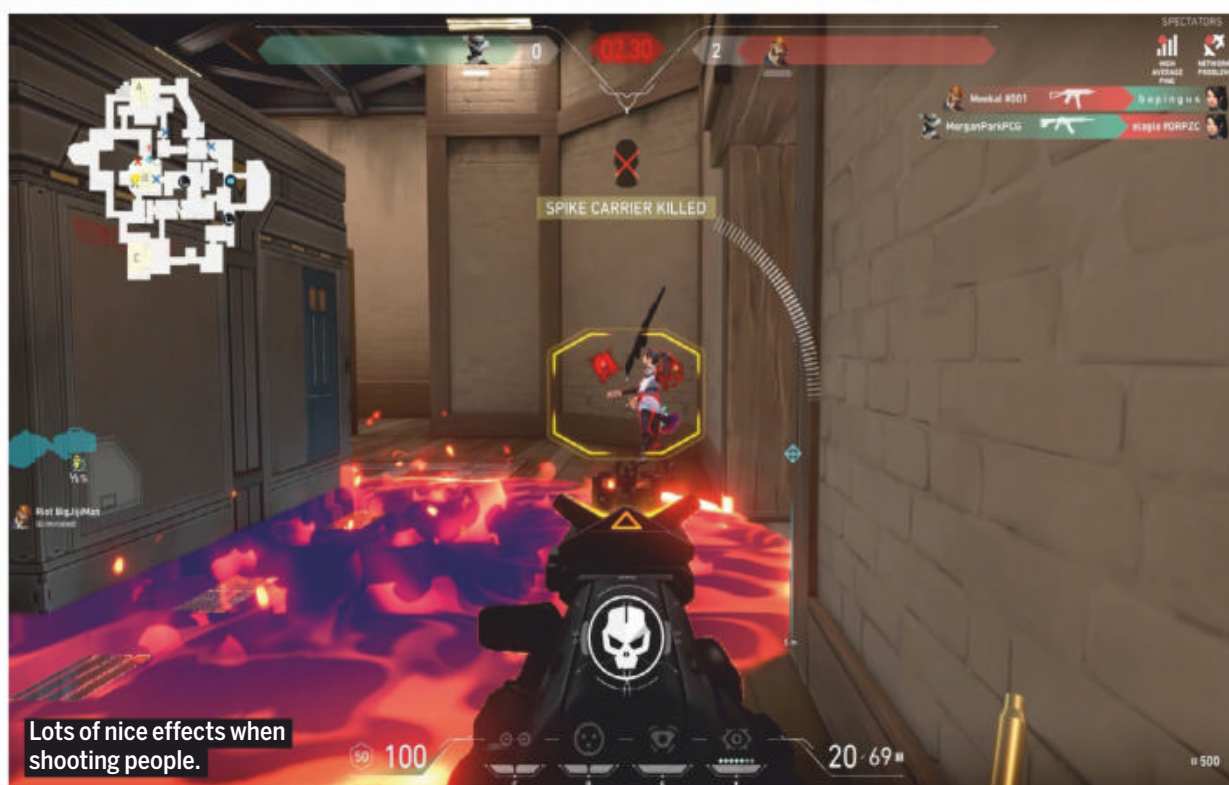
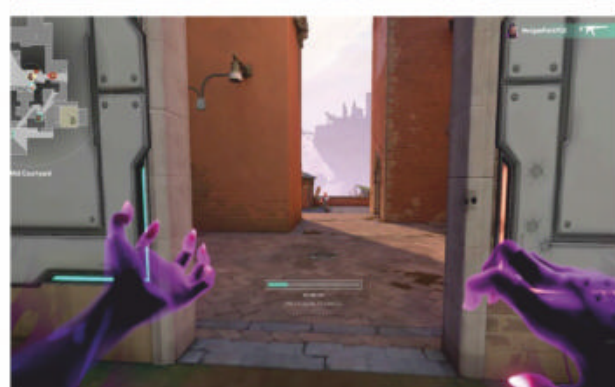
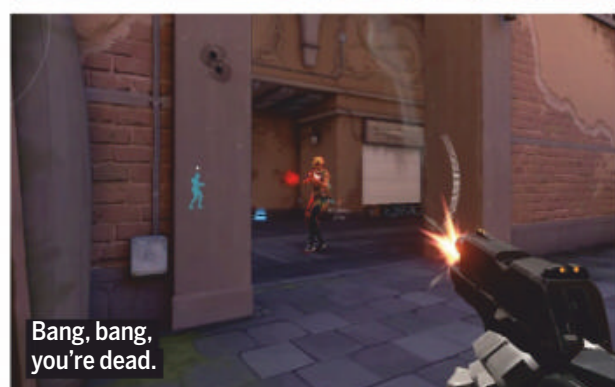
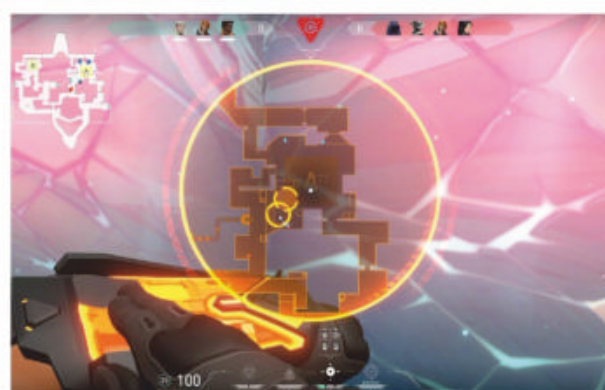
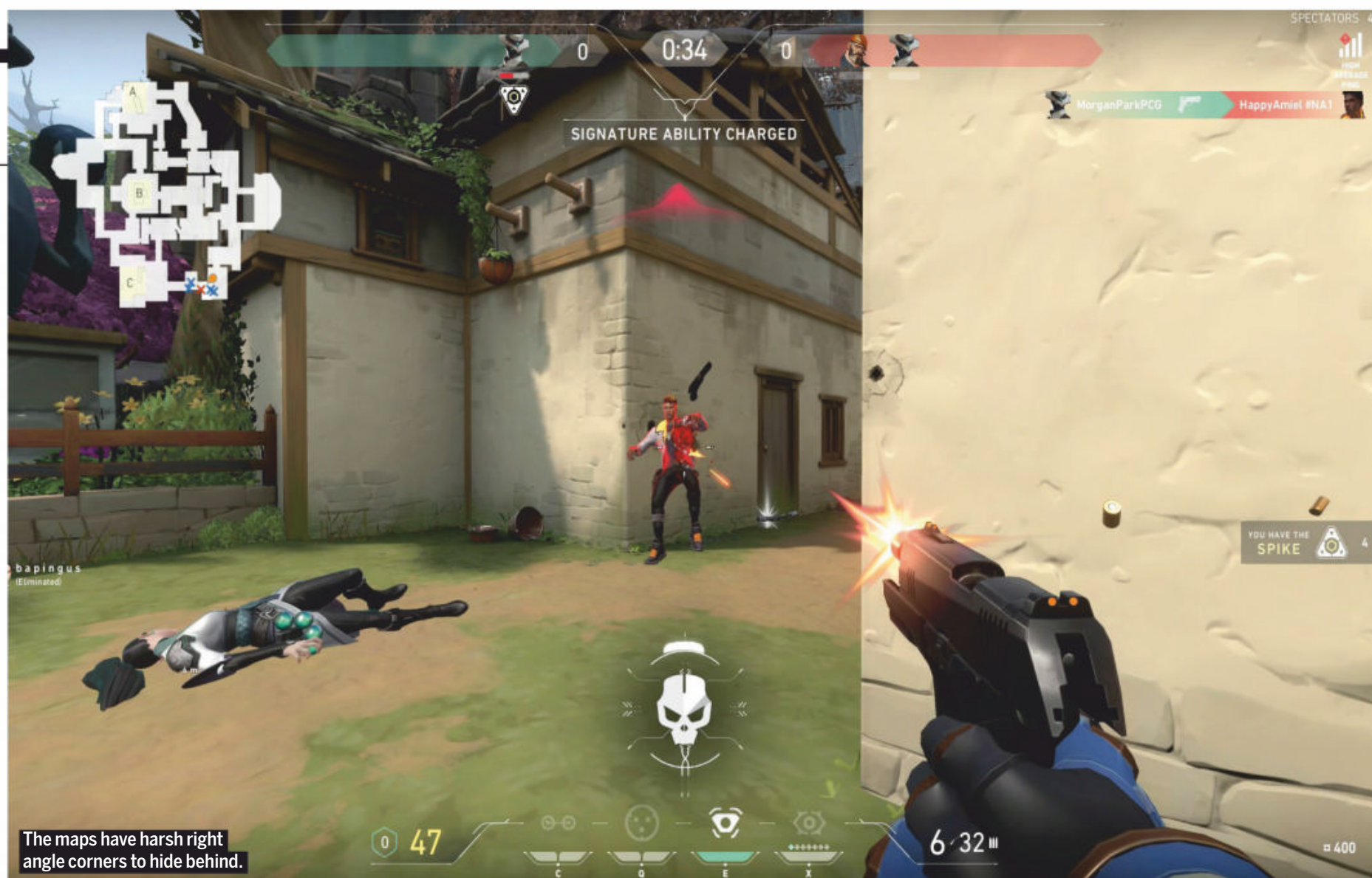


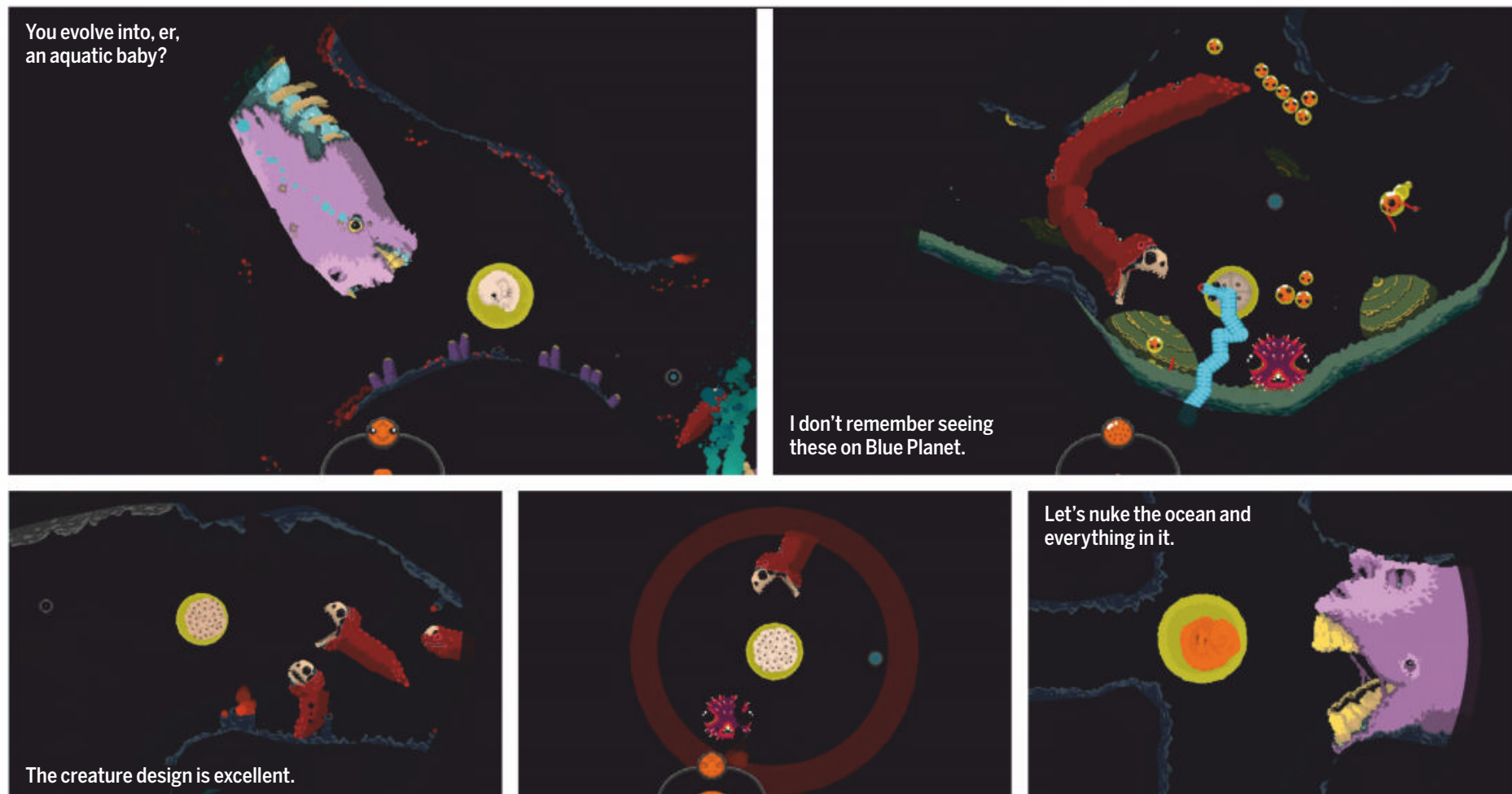
USP-S

PC GAMER VERDICT

With intense gunplay and transformative agent abilities, *Valorant* is an exceptional FPS that everyone should try.

90





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Exploring an ocean of hungry horrors in **SWALLOW THE SEA**

To Sebastian, the singing crab from *The Little Mermaid*: I dispute your claim that life is better, under the sea. I've been down there, just now, fleeing from soggy horrors in the creepy *Swallow the Sea*, and frankly I'm relieved to find myself back on dry land.

You play as a little cell that levels up by swallowing orange, blobby things, before using your newfound power to smash through barriers, and reach new parts of the world. You'll do this a fair few times, gathering even more blobby things, and breaking down bigger barriers, all the while increasing in presence until you resemble a human embryo encased in a bubble.

But the sea isn't kind to people, even when they're weird fish-baby creatures, and most of the things down here are keen to gobble you up – or at least to trap you in place so you're easier prey for their carnivorous mates. So, you have to dodge and dash to give these increasingly horrible sea creatures the slip, while you explore and gather blobs in an aquatic environment.

The pixel art and animation here is expressive and full of character: its sea creatures run the gamut from

adorable to *horrifying*, as they do in the real world. Generally, life here will either flee or make a beeline for you, its teeth gnashing and chomping as the camera zooms in to underline the fact that you're screwed.

God, this is tense. For most of your playthrough, at least, you play as a fragile little clutch of cells, with the game constantly reminding you that it takes only *two hits* for you to become lunch for the disgusting worm-things that roam the ocean. Yes, you gradually grow in power, but then so

do your foes, as the worms are shockingly replaced with The Snake.

The Snake (it might not be a snake; it might just be a primal leviathan with a transgressive human face) announces itself by *kissing you*, before revealing its *second mouth* and giving chase. It's a nightmarish game of Kiss Chase that ends... oh I shouldn't spoil it, but there are a fair

**Generally,
life here will
either flee or
make a beeline
for you**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Evolve in an ocean while being hunted by bloody frightening creatures

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Maceo bob Mair,
Nicolás Delgado

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce GT
610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/SwallowSea

few moments of horror as the monster suddenly appears from nowhere, grinning through its human – yes, human – teeth.

PREPARE TO DIE

You will die, quite a bit, in *Swallow the Sea*, but the checkpoints are pretty generous, and you'll want to persist in order to witness its powerful ending. This is a game all about 'the power curve', that sacred cow of game development: you get stronger, and your enemies feel more trivial as the game goes on. Here, the player grows from a helpless little cell into a regent of the sea, sending those previously deadly worms packing and, eventually, even besting that snakey, Cheshire-smiling git. It's terrifying, as you're hunted down; then it's satisfying, as you become the hunter. But you're left with a stark reminder that – no matter how strong you get – there's always something out there bigger and meaner than you are. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

It's like *Alien: Isolation*, but with a humanoid snake, and set under the sea. Scary, thoughtful, weird and great.

84

HEART TO HEART

KEEP IT ALIVE, or die trying

After playing this post-apocalyptic train sim, I have new sympathy for British Rail, who can hardly be expected to keep the trains timely with all the monsters trying to climb aboard, all the time. To make matters worse, here you're running a train all by yourself, by shovelling coal to keep the engine running, aiming a pistol to shoot those hangers-on, and pumping the big freaky heart you're transporting across the wasteland – keeping it alive, as per the title.

This is a one-screen game where you have to keep those multiple plates spinning, on each leg of a journey between the wasteland's surviving stations. If the heart slows down, you'll need to dart back to pump it up, and if the engine slows down, a zombie-style monster will attempt to jump onboard. Your energy might be limitless, but your bullets and coal

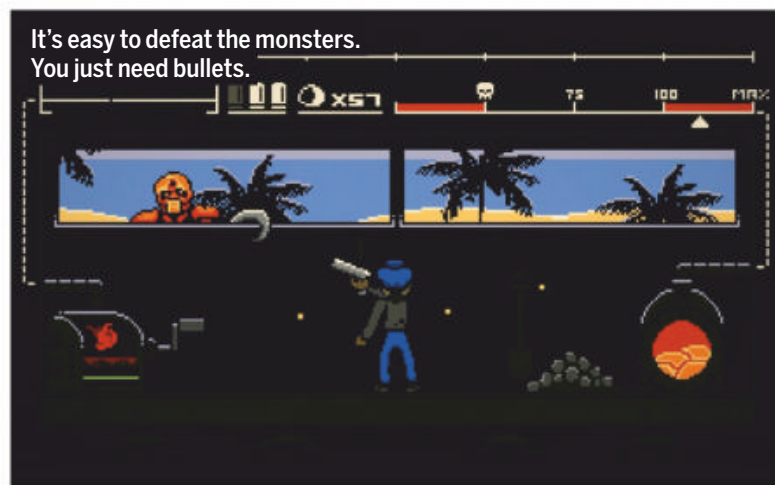
reserves are unfortunately not, and these will only replenish when you arrive at a train station.

Keep It Alive is a challenging game, but not massively so, and brief enough that you (probably) won't tire of the limited actions given to you. *Ideas* are what this game has going for it: the central premise offers a new perspective on an exhausted setting, while some of the smaller details are just lovely to see.

Dart back and forth in the carriage too quickly and your shoelaces will untie – ignore this, and you'll trip over, likely at the most inopportune time. Impressively, elevation is also taken into account, with the camber positively, or negatively, affecting the speed of the train.

The ending might be jarringly silly for most people, but it's the journey that matters here. Quite literally, as a matter of fact. ■

78



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Mullins

LINK
dmullinsgames.itch.io

CUBISM

Life after death in **SAMSARA ROOM**

Should you ever need to feel bad (or just worse) about your level of productivity, consider this fact: developer Rusty Lake has already made 15 games in its five years of operation. The team's latest room-escape-ish adventure game is actually a remake of an older title, released a couple of years before the studio was established with *Cube Escape: The Lake*. Updated with new art, music, more puzzles and ties to the lore of the *Rusty Lake* series, *Samsara Room* is a must-play if you enjoy poking at tactile puzzles.

Themes of life, and death, and rebirth, and having a fish for a head lie at the heart of this puzzle game, whose best feature is its surreal, Twin Peaks-y atmosphere. It may take place inside one room, but you'll test that premise to its limit by turning the contents upside down, by filling it

with water, and by getting a worm's-eye view of your environment. It's room escape taken to a fantastical extreme: a spiritual journey, as you escape the realm of the dead.

Puzzles are everywhere, satisfyingly tactile, hard but not *too* hard. Just when you think, "Oh, I've finally found a shit one," you locate a pattern that unlocks the solution – *Samsara* transcends the frustrating trial-and-error often packaged with pure puzzle games like this.

A great thing about this series is that, far as I can tell, you can begin anywhere. The story lurks in the periphery, but each curious puzzle box stands alone. And what puzzles! I've sampled the series before now, but for me *Samsara* has hit a sweet spot with its testing (but not impossible), and its creative (but not ridiculous) hands-on puzzling. ■

87



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Rusty Lake

LINK
bit.ly/3dEhTPz

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

It's all fun and games until someone loses a contact lens.



No idea why I took a screenshot of an empty stage.



SUPLEX SHITTY

WWE 2K20 isn't quite a Montreal screwjob, but it's close

Professional wrestling is fascinating, isn't it? First you think it's real, then you think it's fake, then you realise it's more real than you ever imagined, in ways it's hard to comprehend. The injuries are legit. Real-life feuds spill over into storylines. The most talented people in the business are the ones that *don't* hurt their opponents. And the only thing weirder than sports entertainment itself are the games that feature it.

Like many of the titles that preceded it, *WWE 2K20* aims to walk the top rope, 'Taker-style, between being a competitive fighting game and a means of simulating the spectacle of the real thing. And there are moments when it feels right – times when you pull off a reversal at exactly the right time, hit a signature move, and change the direction of a match. But there's always that sense that you're not actually playing a game.

Instead, you're tussling with systems that prevent you from telling the story you want. We're wrestling fans, so we want to create moments that make the highlight reel. We want to throw opponents through tables and accidentally knock out the ref. We don't mind losing if it's right for the narrative. But in *2K20* these things rarely happen organically, and trying

to exert any control over the story of the match feels like trying to put lipstick on a boisterous dog.

The Four Horsewomen storyline is a great example. It's a worthwhile tale, detailing the ascendancy of women's wrestling. The video promos help give it a documentary feel. And it's a respectful step forward, especially since bra and panties matches were a thing as recently as *WWE SmackDown! VS Raw 2006*, in which

you had to 'fill your Fantasy Meter by disrobing, swinging pillows, and spanking your opponent's rear end'. But also: it just doesn't work. Instead of steamrolling through an inspiring story, you wrangle your opponent while constantly checking what objective you need to do next. I failed three times in the second match because Charlotte Flair managed to

There's always that sense that you're not actually playing a game

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The Shockmaster's entrance as a wrestling game

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Visual Concepts

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1015500/WWE_2K20/

sneak a pin while I was trying to get the third consecutive chest chop necessary to progress the 'match'.

SUMMER FEST

I'm being horrible because wrestling, done right, is brilliant, and a big-budget tie in game should be brilliant too. We should have modern, emergent ragdoll physics that surprise and amaze; not the same stock animations that have been gathering virtual dust for ten or more years. We should have the power to push stars and tweak stories in ways that realise our smark dreams. Instead, we get mic spots in *WWE 2K20* that feel like they've been through Google translate three times.

And all this is before talking about the bugs in the PC version, paywalled content, or character models that look like WWE cake decorations baked by a distracted mum. There's fun to be had here if you love wrestling enough, but you can't help but feel exploited for enjoying it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Dwayne Gill of wrestling games – an entertaining gimmick that lasts ten minutes before getting annoying.

48

ORC SPORT

Hail Mary it's **BLOOD BOWL 2**

Just because this month's theme is sport, it doesn't mean they all have to be real. This is proof, were it needed, that I'll find a way to put Warhammer in anything. That sandwich you just made. The jumper your mum knitted. The magazine you're reading. They all contain Warhammer now.

Blood Bowl 2 is more polished than I expected. There's always a sense of trepidation when firing up a Warhammer tie-in for the first time: is it one of the games that got made while the Games Workshop QA team were looking in another direction? Or is it one of the good ones? Thankfully, this is more skewed towards the latter, but it's not without its faults.

Good stuff first. It's crammed with deep, on-brand cuts for Warhammer Fantasy fans. The animated commentary team is perfectly

obnoxious. There are references everywhere that are just smart enough for seasoned fantasy fans to feel smug. And there's enough fluff on the loading screens to fill a whole battletome. It's ideal if you want to immerse yourself in the Lazarus pit of Warhammer Fantasy nostalgia.

The actual matches are wobblier. The measured, tactical take on American Football can feel laboured, and too much time is spent explaining the obvious stuff while more complicated elements are skimmed over. And then, just as you're beginning to grasp the technical elements of the game, the randomness of its systems hit you like an ogre chasing a pie. The zaniness is part of *Blood Bowl's* lasting appeal, but it can feel capricious and frustrating for anyone who's unprepared. I still like it – but don't expect much fair play. ■

66



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Cyanide Studios

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive



ROCKET LEAGUE

You remember that bit in *The Shining* when Jack typed the same sentence over and over? This entry could be that but with the words 'sorry I got it wrong'. I reviewed *Rocket League* in 2015 and scored it an idiotic 87 percent, when it's clearly one of the greatest multiplayer games on PC. So yes: I'm sorry. Going back to it now feels like bumping into a former paramour who ended up being fabulously successful. I'm not even angry with you, *Rocket League*. I'm glad that you're important enough to have your own Back To The Future tie-in DLC. I knew you when you were new and pure and special, and honestly, I didn't give you the love you deserved. ■

92



CRICKET 19

When searching for a cricket tie-in, it's tempting to go back to *Ashes Cricket 2013*, a game so heinous that all trace of it has been scrubbed from Steam. But *Cricket 19* is good, and something of an antidote to a summer spent without the reassuring crack of leather on willow. There's enough depth for tactical play and the systems feel intuitive. But my favourite thing is how long it takes. Even the short form version of the game, Twenty20, will eat up a significant portion of an evening, and that's widely considered a reductive coin-toss by Test Match purists. This doesn't feel like a finessed, big-budget release, but the love for the sport is evident in every meandering over. ■

80



OLLIOLLI

This skateboarding game's presentation really appeals to me. Or, rather, its total lack of it. You skate in a utilitarian hellscape while cool music plays. That's it. It's the opposite of WWE's creatine-gorged bulk of pointless extras around a brittle skeleton. It's a game where you're happy to sit and do the same level for an entire evening until you've nailed your high score. It has the same sense of repetition as *Hotline Miami*, except that in *OlliOlli* every shattered kneecap is your own fault. ■

83



PAPER POWER

60% of the energy used to produce paper and paper packaging in Europe comes from renewable sources.

Discover the story of paper
www.lovepaper.org

Source: Confederation of European Paper Industries (CEPI), 2018
CEPI represents 92% of European pulp and paper production



HARDWARE

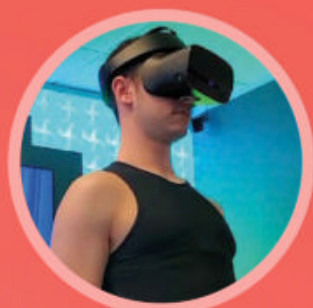
GET THE PC YOU WANT



84

GROUP TEST

Find your perfect graphics card.



88

TECH REPORT

The VR games that could keep astronauts sane.



90

BUYER'S GUIDE

Our expert advice for building your next PC.



GROUP TEST

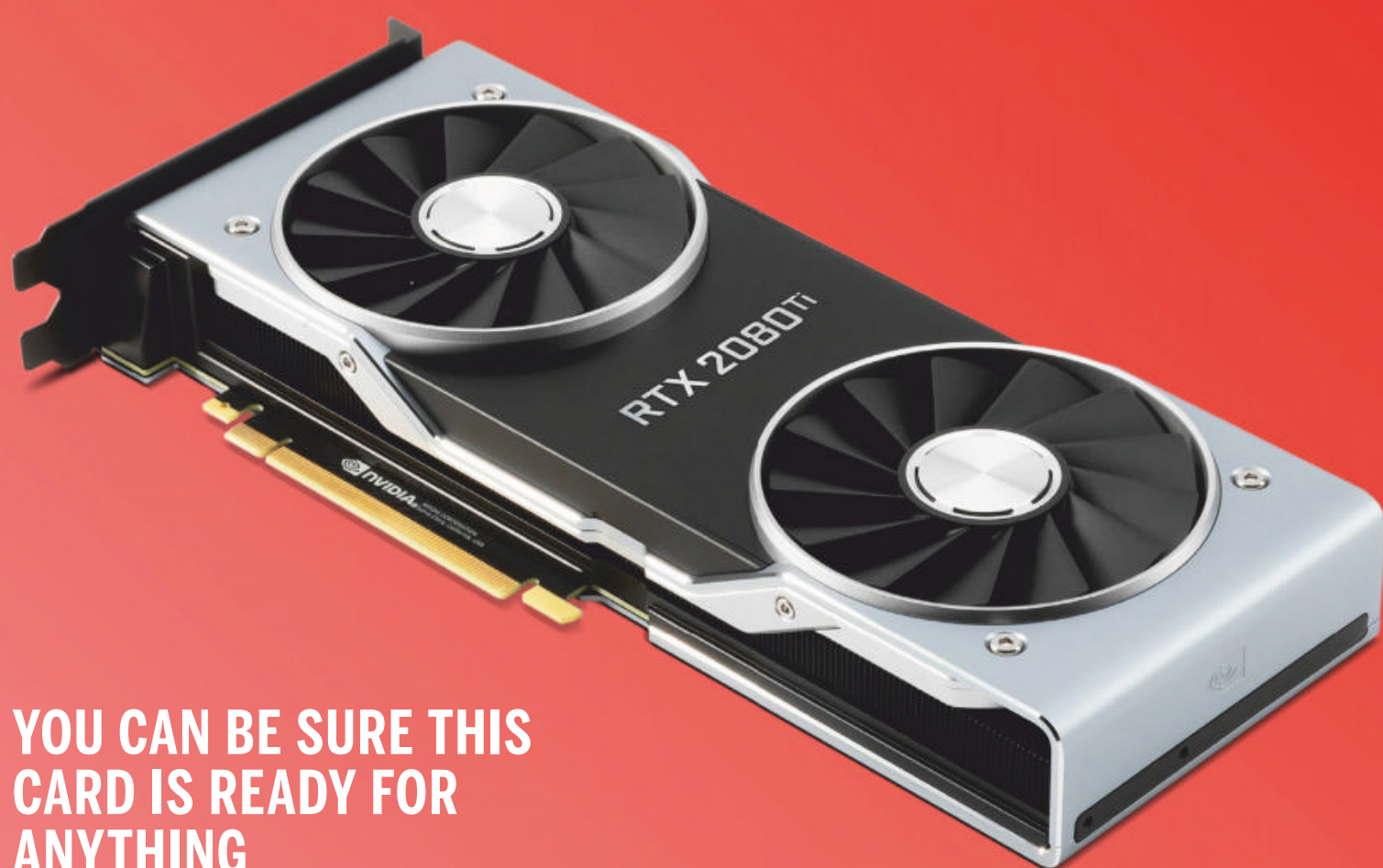
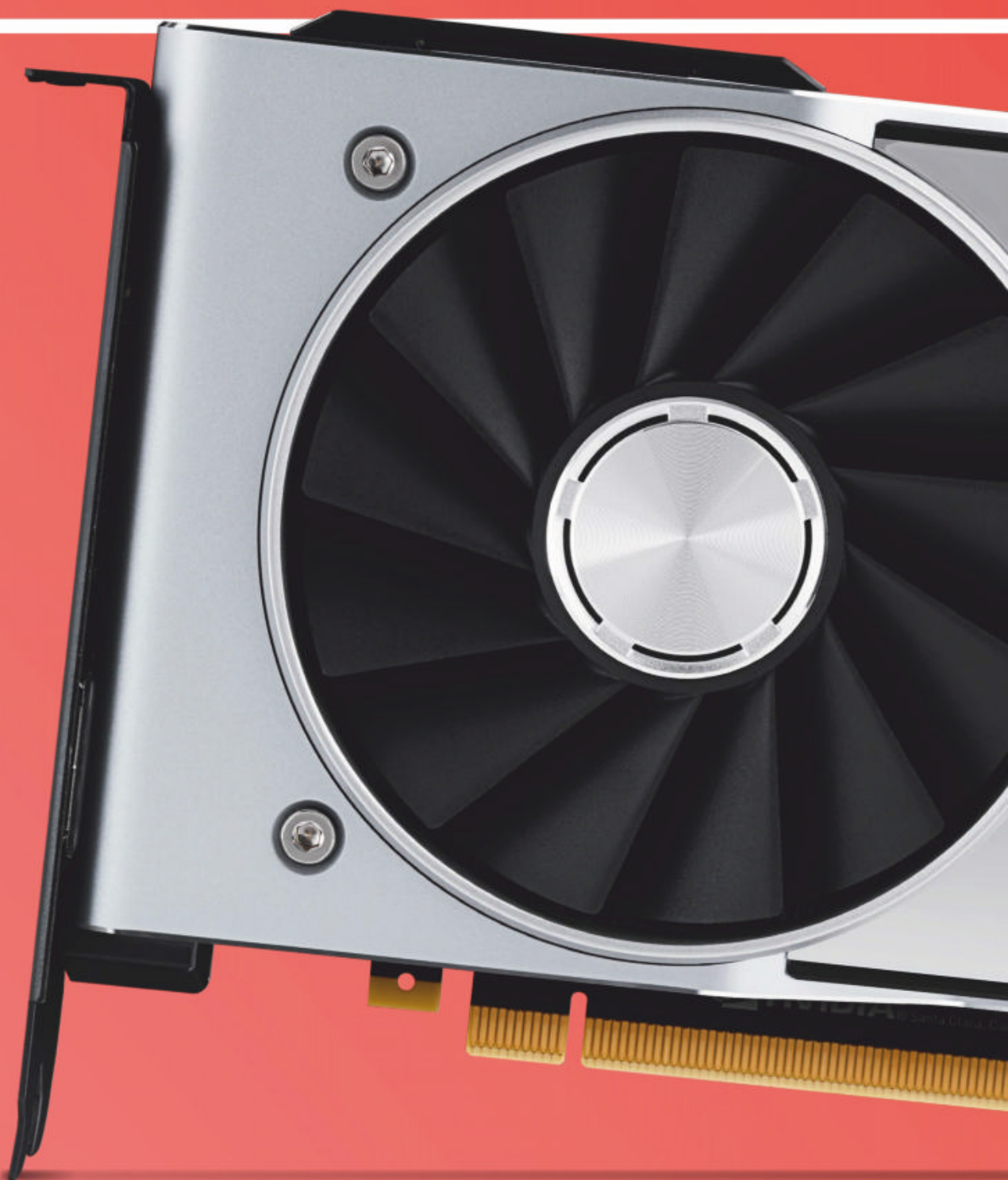
GRAPHICS CARDS

Upgrade for the best 4K gaming experience. *By Dave James & Jacob Ridley*

There's no component more crucial to a gaming PC than a graphics card. It's the heart of any system that favours frame rate and fidelity above all else, and that's why it's of the utmost importance to leave aside plenty of budget and choose wisely when it comes to your next upgrade.

You've got to ask yourself some questions when deciding on a new graphics card – such as “what resolution can my monitor run at?” and “do I really need an Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti?”.

There are times when you will need an RTX 2080 Ti. If the goal for your PC is to deliver the very best 4K gaming experience that money can buy then this card's many cores and 11GB video memory are best suited to deliver. But with a price tag of £1,149 (\$1,199) most of us will have to be a more parsimonious about our PC upgrades. That's why we recommend looking further afield, including AMD's Radeon lineup, to grab a great value card.



**YOU CAN BE SURE THIS
CARD IS READY FOR
ANYTHING**



2

GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

NVIDIA **£1,149**

Most powerful graphics card (a lot of) money can buy

1 Released back in 2018, the RTX 2080 Ti is still the fastest consumer graphics card that you can stick into your PC. If you wanted to go all out you could squeeze a Titan RTX in there for the full-fat TU102 GPU, but that will net you an even less of a performance return for the extra \$1,300 you'd have to spend for the privilege.

One glance at the spec list and you can be sure the top RTX Turing card is ready for pretty much anything PC gaming can throw at it. Though even the RTX 2080 Ti will struggle to nail 4K gaming with your graphics settings dialed up to max and ray

tracing turned on. If you're after the most powerful GPU especially for the burgeoning ray tracing ecosystem, this is the best graphics card around. It's just that it's a really tough GPU to recommend when you could buy a pretty decent prebuilt gaming PC for that much cash. The value proposition then is pretty much non-existent, making the RTX 2080 Ti the working definition of a money-no-object GPU.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Fastest graphics card around
- ⊕ Ray tracing and deep learning tech
- ⊕ More developers moving to embrace ray tracing

SPECS CUDA CORES: 4,352 / **BASE CLOCK:** 1,350MHz / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,545MHz / **TFLOPS:** 13.4 / **MEMORY:** 11GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY CLOCK:** 14GT/s / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 616GB/s

GeForce RTX 2070 Super

NVIDIA **£489**

The best 4K graphics card for reasonable money

2 The RTX 2070 Super is the fourth tier Turing card in the current, incredibly packed Nvidia GPU stack, but for our money it's the card we'd be happy recommending to people building a 4K gaming PC. It's a better version of the GTX 1080 Ti from the last generation, for less cash and with ray tracing potential.

It's also incredibly close to the performance of the far more expensive RTX 2080. That makes it an entirely different card to the standard RTX 2070 and much better for it. The Super is basically an RTX 2080 Lite. But that name sounds stupid. 'Super' is cooler.

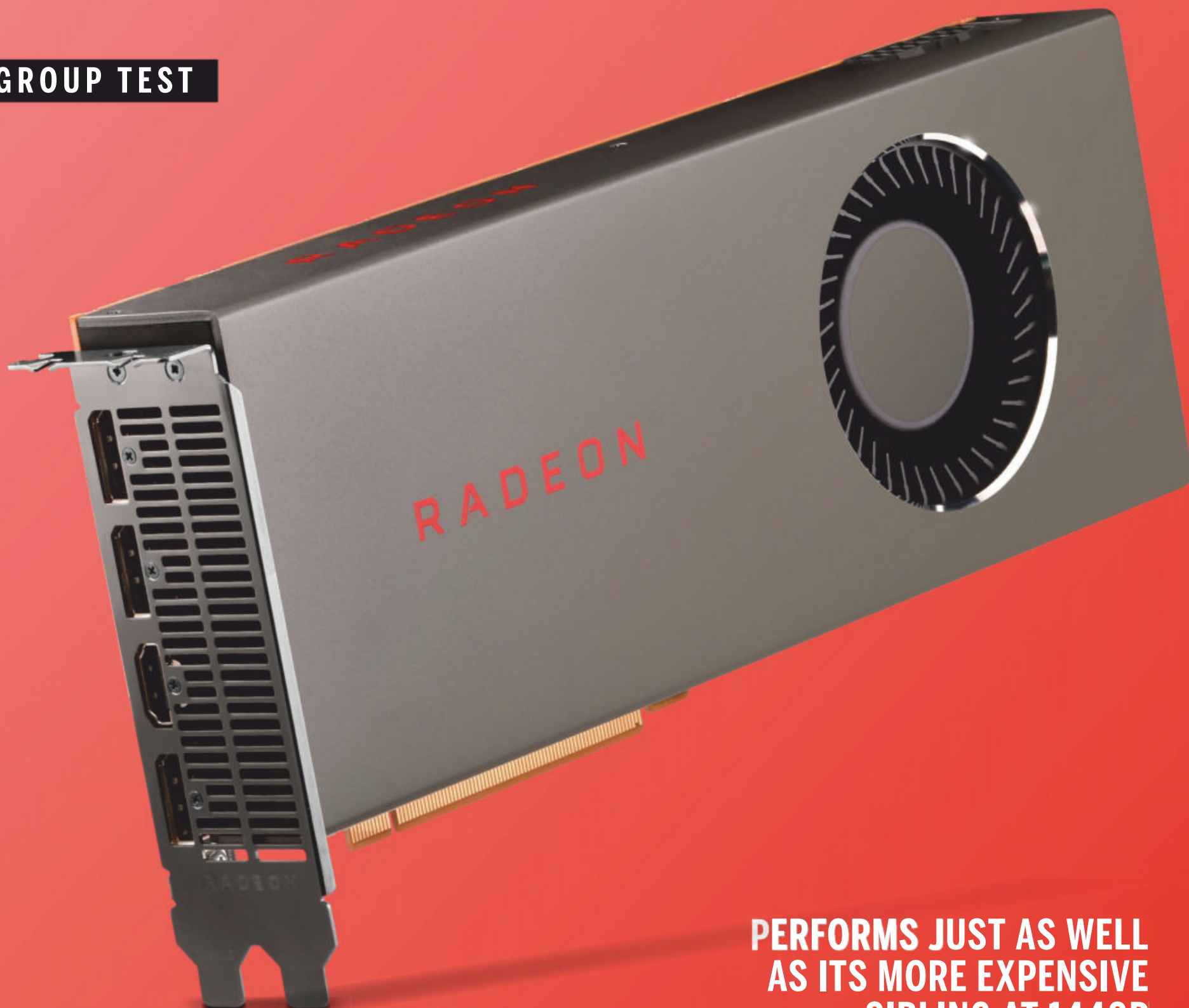
The RTX 2080 and RTX 2080 Super are both faster graphics cards, but unless you can find one for near the \$500 sticker price of the RTX 2070 Super I couldn't recommend them to anyone with a passing interest in their continued financial stability. And the fact that the RTX 2070 Super can nail impressive 4K gaming performance on high settings makes it a great-value high-end GPU, and one of our favourites.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Outperforms a GTX 1080 Ti for less money
- ⊕ Almost RTX 2080 performance
- ⊕ Impressive 4K gaming

SPECS CUDA CORES: 2,560 / **BASE CLOCK:** 1,605MHz / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,770MHz / **TFLOPS:** 9.06 / **MEMORY:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY CLOCK:** 14GT/s / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 448GB/s

GROUP TEST



3

**PERFORMS JUST AS WELL
AS ITS MORE EXPENSIVE
SIBLING AT 1440P**

Radeon RX 5700

AMD **£340**

The best 1440p graphics card

3 We love AMD's RX 5700. The Navi architecture, with its gaming-focused RDNA core, has delivered team Radeon a GPU generation that can genuinely compete with Nvidia's graphics cards, and not just on a cost basis. That's not happened in a long while, and the RX 5700 and RX 5700 XT now sit proud at the top of the GPU stack for AMD.

But, as is often the way with Radeon cards, it's the lower-cost option which is the one we recommend. In truth it's not far off the performance of the XT card out of the box. The four-core difference in RDNA core-count

doesn't make a lot of difference when it comes to gaming performance, it's the GPU frequency that matters. But because of AMD's artificial limits you need to unlock the RX 5700 with software to be able to run them at the same clock speeds.

And then it performs just as well as its more expensive sibling at 1440p, making the RX 5700 one of the best graphics cards around right now.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Affordable 1440p performance
- ⊕ Nearly as good as the RX 5700 XT
- ⊕ Easy to unlock full power
- ⊖ No ray tracing support

SPECS RDNA CORES: 2,304 / **BASE CLOCK:** 1,465MHz / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,725MHz / **TFLOPS:** 7.95 / **MEMORY:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY CLOCK:** 14GT/S / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 448GB/S

Radeon RX 5600 XT

AMD **£279**

The best 1080p graphics card

4 This is exactly what AMD set out to create: the best graphics card for 1080p gaming. Though its final form isn't exactly what the red team set out to create. A last-minute firmware update bumped up the clock speed and memory performance of most RX 5600 XT cards, and not all GPUs received the upgrade to both clock speed and memory performance. It's worth checking the downloads section for any card you're looking at to see if it's had the BIOS update to 14Gbps before you spend your money.

But with the update the RX 5600 XT is incredibly close to the

performance of the RTX 2060, making it more of a tricky decision as to which card to go for. That's made harder when factory overclocked versions of both GPUs are on sale for prices well north of \$300, which then gets you into RX 5700 territory.

When you can pick up an RX 5600 XT for its original, sub-\$300 price tag, however, it becomes the go-to for 1080p gaming without compromise.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ The 'ultimate' 1080p graphics card
- ⊕ Great base price
- ⊕ Can reach RTX 2060-level performance

SPECS RDNA CORES: 2,304 / **BASE CLOCK:** 1,375MHz / **BOOST CLOCK:** 1,560-1,750MHz / **TFLOPS:** 8.07 / **MEMORY:** 6GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY CLOCK:** 12-14GT/S / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 288-336GB/S

4



BUY NOW OR WAIT THE NEXT GENERATION?

Sometimes the big question isn't which graphics card you should buy, it's when. We fall into the buy it now camp. There's almost always a new graphics card 'only half a year away', and they are often tipped to deliver quadruple the performance for a quarter of the price. That kind of generational jump never happens, though, and neither do timely release dates in line with rumours, all the while you could've been enjoying a new card without any buyer's remorse.

The only exception to the rule is when there really is a new graphics card launch in the imminent future. We tend to receive official confirmation only moments prior to a graphics card's release, but once we do it's best to hold off and wait a bit longer to pick up the new silicon hot off the wafer.



5



6

GeForce GTX 1660 Super

NVIDIA **£210**

The best sub-\$250 GPU around

5 The Nvidia GTX 1660 Super was a preemptive strike against AMD's RX 5500 XT and effectively killed it dead. For only a little more cash (sometimes there's nothing between them) the upgraded GTX 1660 easily tops it in gaming performance. It also highlights just how much memory really matters in this middle order of the best graphics cards.

The GTX 1660 Super is one of four 16-series cards to use the same TU116 GPU, and does indeed use the exact same chip as the original GTX 1660. The only difference is that it's been paired up with GDDR6 memory as

opposed to GDDR5. That makes it quicker than the standard card and, because it's using the higher performance 14Gbps VRAM, it can perform at practically the same level as the more expensive GTX 1660 Ti despite having less actual GPU logic inside its chip.

Which means that as well as knocking out the RX 5500 XT, it also committed a little light fratricide on its GTX 1660 and GTX 1660 Ti brethren too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Excellent 1080p gaming performance
- ⊕ Cheaper than RX 5600 XT
- ⊕ High-performance VRAM

SPECS CUDA CORES: 1,408 / BASE CLOCK: 1,530MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,785MHz / TFLOPS: 5 / MEMORY: 6GB GDDR6 / MEMORY SPEED: 14GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 336GB/s

GeForce GTX 1650 Super

NVIDIA **£152**

The best cheap graphics card

6 Nvidia's GTX 1650 Super is the best value graphics card on the market today. Often for less than \$200 you're looking at a graphics card able to deliver impressive 1080p frame rates at even the highest in-game settings.

As has become a familiar refrain with regards to Nvidia's deployment of the Super series of GPU updates, the GTX 1650 Super is more a GTX 1660 Lite than it is a GTX 1650. It uses the same TU116 GPU as the rest of the GTX 1660 cards, but there are already three of them and it's confusing enough sorting between those as it is. With the

switch in GPUs the GTX 1650 Super has more cores than the straight GTX 1650.

That all makes it a far superior card to its GTX 1650 brethren and mighty close to the GTX 1660 Super and 1660 Ti on the Turing performance totem pole. Despite the fact its ultra-competitive original \$160 price tag can sometimes be tricky to find, its pricing still makes the competing AMD RX 5500 XT look expensive.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Best value GPU around today
- ⊕ Impressive 1080p gaming performance
- ⊕ Superb performance per dollar

SPECS CUDA CORES: 1,280 / BASE CLOCK: 1,530MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,725MHz / TFLOPS: 4.42 / MEMORY: 4GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 12GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 192GB/s

Z3VR's meditation module, showing the ring-and-sphere breath control system and a giant red fish.

Exit Module

LONELY PLANET

How astronauts will don VR headsets to offset the effects of isolation

You're trapped in something the size of a camper van with three of your buddies for the next three years. The payoff is that you get to go to Mars, but at what cost? How do you look after your mental health on such a strange journey?

Crewed missions to Mars and beyond are still in the planning stage at NASA and private companies such as SpaceX. In 2015, then-administrator of NASA Charles Bolden pointed to 2030 as the date for a human landing on the red planet, and current US Vice-President Mike Pence wants boots on the surface of the Moon again in 2024. There's rather more to it than jumping on the top of a giant missile and setting up a guidance computer running at 0.043MHz though. Long periods of isolation can have detrimental effects on any human, not just astronauts, and the mental health of crews needs to be considered. Which is where the NASA Human Research Program, the Translational Research Institute for Space Health (TRISH), and a startup VR company come in.

But first, to a film festival. "I'm on a team of people that goes to South by Southwest every year," says Josh Ruben of Z3VR, a Houston-based company that was spun out of Friday VR sessions at his previous employer, a medical device manufacturer. "And on that team with us is a woman named Dorit Donoviel. She is the director of TRISH, and basically, in

the second year of my affiliation with this team, you know, just one night we started talking about the applications of virtual reality and space health generally." As you do.

FAR OUT

TRISH is a body that aims to prepare NASA for future space health challenges, and it's sending out grants to lots of companies. Eventually, somebody's going to get ill in space. An appendix will burst on Mars, an explorer on Titan will break their leg, or horrible space-leeches will bore into the bone marrow of the first humans to explore Enceladus because they're idiots like in *Prometheus*. Astronauts also need to look after themselves on the long journeys between planets, as long periods of isolation have deleterious effects on human brains. "The University of Pennsylvania conducted a study at a base in Antarctica for nine months," explains Ruben. "And what they found was that, basically, isolation is extremely bad for people. There were significant levels of atrophy in an area of the brain called the hippocampus, specifically the dentate gyrus, which is part of the brain that's responsible for spatial navigation, spatial mapping and planning, which makes a lot of sense because if you're in one environment and you're not seeing anything else you really don't use it."

And that's not all. "There's something called BDNF [Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor], and this can be thought of as – I'm gonna generalise – the Miracle Gro of the brain,"



Into the void

Up until now, the most isolated humans have been the early Apollo Command Module pilots who remained orbiting the Moon while their crewmates got to land and have all the fun. For 45 minutes every orbit, the module was unable to communicate with Earth, leaving the pilot alone with just the universe for company.



FAR LEFT: The exercise module tracks movements to correct the form of astronauts.

LEFT: Lifting weights in space is easy, they weigh nothing. So astronauts exercise against resistance, strapping themselves into machines.

ESCAPE VELOCITY *Taking a peek at NASA's plans*



1 INNER SPACE
The interior of the ISS – this is the control station for one of the robotic arms – is a complex space to navigate.



2 THE RED PLANET
Mars. The current target for humans in space, and a three-year space-flight away.



3 NICE BELT
The Orion capsule is NASA's current choice of spacecraft for deep-space missions.



4 COOPED UP
With four astronauts inside, the Orion capsule doesn't offer a great deal of room for exercise.

says Ruben. "This underpins neuroplasticity. What they found was that for every month the astronaut was in isolation, BDNF levels decreased substantially. And what that tells us is that the brain is becoming less plastic." BDNF is also essential for long-term memory, learning and higher thinking, important things when you're facing the final frontier.

"We now want to see if virtual reality can serve as a countermeasure. Can we protect the brain against decreases in BDNF through novel stimulus presentation and virtual reality environments? And then, can we protect the dentate gyrus and the hippocampus through that same mechanism?" Ruben's company is creating these environments thanks to a grant from TRISH, but they're not like the VR games we all know and, well, know. Instead of being chased by headcrabs or grabbing tumbling oxygen cylinders, Z3VR's environments are somewhat more placid.

"We have two environments that we've built," says Ruben. "The first is in the exercise module, a futuristic city that they're exercising in. NASA has also recently become very interested in the concept of meditative respiration – breathing in a specific pattern. So we've also built an environment in which we can guide their breath. The entire environment will react to their breath. There's an orb in the centre of the environment that will expand and contract in accordance with how much air is in their lungs. Around that orb, there is a guide ring. That ring is variable, and the objective of the astronaut is to keep their breath in accordance with that ring. So the orb should expand at the same rate that the guide ring expands."

VIRTUAL SANITY

And of course, those VR environments will need the right equipment to access. NASA already has exercise and body-monitoring hardware aboard the ISS, but no Oculus Rifts. For now. "We're using off-the-shelf stuff," says Ruben. "But what I will say is that most, in fact, every, off-the-shelf VR headset today would not work in space. We're using the Rift S, but we're agnostic, we can use whatever headset we want really." It turns out there are all kinds of problems with microgravity virtual reality. "If you're profusely sweating, it's kind of uncomfortable. But in space, all that water just flows into your eyes. So we need some sort of active mechanism to keep that sweat out of the user's field of view."

And they're going to need some better computing power to run it too. As amusing as it is to think of future deep-space missions being loaded up with RGB-filled towers, mechanical

keyboards and ultrawide monitors, the reality is that the current state of PCs in space is a sad one. The ISS is home to some laptops – the 2007-vintage Thinkpad T61p machines running a mix of Linux and Windows 7 have been gradually replaced, since 2017, with HP Zbook 15s, which keep the same Linux distributions (Debian and Scientific Linux) but get an upgrade to Windows 10. The 2020 Zbook is VR-ready with its Nvidia Quadro RTX 3000 GPU (that's the same chip as an RTX 2070 mobile GPU, but running slower), but who knows what the recommended specifications for space gaming will be in around ten years' time. ■

Ian Evenden

"MOST, IN FACT, EVERY, OFF-THE-SHELF VR HEADSET TODAY WOULD NOT WORK IN SPACE"

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

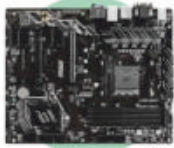
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£849

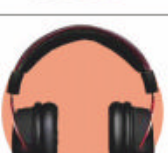
MOTHERBOARD		B450-A Pro Max MSI £95 A healthy dose of ports and PCIe SSD support has this B450 at the heart of our budget build.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 3 3300X AMD £115 AMD has packed its latest Zen 2 architecture into a speedy four-core package, and that's great for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce GTX 1650 Super Gigabyte £165 The GTX 1650 Super is much more than a rebrand of the GTX 1650, securing it the budget crown.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with the CPU Gone are the days when a stock cooler was little more than a bonus paperweight. AMD's Wraith Stealth delivers.
MEMORY		Vengeance 8GB DDR4 (2x4GB) Corsair £40 The new norm for gaming is 16GB, but dual-channel 8GB memory is enough to get by for most.
POWER SUPPLY		CX Series CX550 Corsair £74 Corsair's reputation for quality PSUs precedes them. You know you're in safe hands here.
SSD		WD Blue SN550 500GB Western Digital £67 Just because it's a budget SSD, doesn't mean it has to be slow, as the WD SN550 proves with its speedy NVMe connectivity.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,455

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 KO GAMING EVGA £320 The RTX 2060 is a taste of the good life, where frame rates are high and real-time ray tracing is possible.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £150 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed—the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, and it's AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £80 Does it get any better than the HyperX Cloud Alpha? Well, yes, but not anywhere close to this sort of price point.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,689

MOTHERBOARD

**Z390 Aorus Master**Gigabyte **£247**

If you want all the bells and whistles, the Aorus Master delivers alongside Intel's high-end chipset.

PROCESSOR

**Core i9 9900KF**Intel **£489**

It's one of the fastest gaming chips around and you don't need Intel's integrated graphics with a great gaming GPU in place.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 2080 Super XC**EVGA **£762**

The RTX 2080 Super is the more reasonably priced super high-end enthusiast graphics card out of the Nvidia skunkworks.

COOLER

**Kraken X63**NZXT **£123**

One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.

MEMORY

**Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200**Corsair **£176**

If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.

POWER SUPPLY

**HX750i 80 Plus Platinum**Corsair **£163**

Platinum doesn't just sound good, it means this PSU is rated to the highest tiers of energy efficiency, too.

SSD

**WD Black SN750 1TB**Western Digital **£169**

Western Digital are back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.

HDD

**860 QVO 2TB**Samsung **£195**

Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to a HDD.

CASE

**600C**Corsair **£135**

If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.

DISPLAY

**Nitro XV273K**Acer **£780**

This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.

KEYBOARD

**G915 Lightspeed**Logitech **£210**

Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **£110**

With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET

**Arctis 7 Wireless**SteelSeries **£130**

If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"Oh Richard, don't tell me you left the defibrillators in the car."



“I just got revived, and for the briefest of moments so too is the magic”

Bringing a wayward team of un-PC gamers back for one last job in **BATTLEFIELD 4**

Regrettably I wasn't lucky enough to get my hair cut in the last week before lockdown, but I was fortunate enough to have my brother-in-law rig up an ethernet port in my home office.

Much to the despair of my family, and sausage dogs, this was to signify a momentous return to gaming, the likes of which no hurried garage conversion had ever seen before. At least I'd hoped so.

It's been several months since I've played games with any meaningful passion, and at least a year since I've joined the old boys from my *Battlefield* clan for a few rounds of 'Sweary McShoot Bang'.

JOHN STRIKE



THIS MONTH
Attempted potty training with disastrous results.

ALSO PLAYED
Twinkle Twinkle Little Star on a miniature xylophone

After *Battlefield 1* and *5* came along we all seemed to melt away, some meltier than others. But with no end in sight to the lockdown and with a decent internet line I was ready to revive some of the old magic.

At this point *Battlefield 4* is over seven years old – but to me it remains the last great *Battlefield* game by a merry mile. It has dedicated servers to support its communities, a polished hardcore mode, some

stunning levolution mechanics, and an arsenal of vehicles and weapons that put *Battlefield 5*'s sad collection of antiques firmly in the shade.

A round with my team begins as it always used to, with members ping-ponging insults, dog memes, and pictures of their loft conversions to each other in our Facebook chat.

Even considering the lockdown, I'm struck by how many people are playing this ageing game two sequels later. There are dozens of populated servers and game types to choose

TO ME IT REMAINS THE LAST GREAT BATTLEFIELD GAME BY A MERRY MILE



Some of the visuals are still pretty dazzling.

from, so we hop onto a 64-man hardcore Conquest.

INFLATED OPINIONS

Battlefield 4's shooting is punchy and effective, the movements reactive, and generally the game just feels brilliant. Blasting a transport chopper out of the sky with a tank is still one of the most satisfying moments in any videogame, as the list of kills scroll up and up.

As usual our Discord channel is lit up with enough profanity to make Roy Chubby Brown blush, and our communication is like the final attack on the Death Star attempted by the cast of *The Inbetweeners*. Mid-game one of our Swedish chaps tells us his girlfriend is going to jump in and play. "Is she inflatable?" I ask. "Or rechargeable?" asks another, much to the amusement of the channel. We're funny, you see. It later transpires that the Swede, though a great player himself, now has an actual girlfriend called Tuva, and she's better at *BF4* than him.

The 64-man round is intense. We're still able to broadly stick together, sing out enemy positions when we get hit and revive one another. For the briefest of moments the magic is revived too.

Sadly it's a short lived love affair, and just a week later we've fizzled away again. Still, while there are a group of friends who genuinely enjoy playing together, there's always hope for the next *Battlefield*. ■



"Messiness is its greatest strength"

Broken is better in **MONSTER TRAIN**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Discovered how hellish public transport can be.

ALSO PLAYED
Middle-earth: Shadow of War, *Blood Bowl 2*

There's a strange idea in PC gaming that all games should strive for balance. A good game, conventional wisdom goes, is one in which every option feels as viable as any other, and everything is kept neatly in its place. 'Broken' is a dirty word.

But in actuality, not only is balance ephemeral – far more about psychology than any kind of objective truth – it's not always the path to fun.

Slay the Spire is a perfect example of a game that understands that. On its face, it's a card-based roguelike about building the most efficient deck you can. But in order to beat its toughest challenges, efficiency isn't enough – you need to break the game, distorting the rules to your advantage and creating combinations that any other game would have written out at QA. And it's amazing fun. You don't beat *Slay the Spire* at its own game – you beat it at yours.

It's inspired its fair share of imitators, but few have truly grasped that idea – until *Monster Train*. When I first saw screens of this

Snowpiercer-meets-Dante's-Inferno roguelike, I thought it looked a mess. Too much going on, too many clashing aesthetics – a far cry from *Slay the Spire*'s minimalism. But once I gave it a proper try, I realised messiness is its greatest strength.

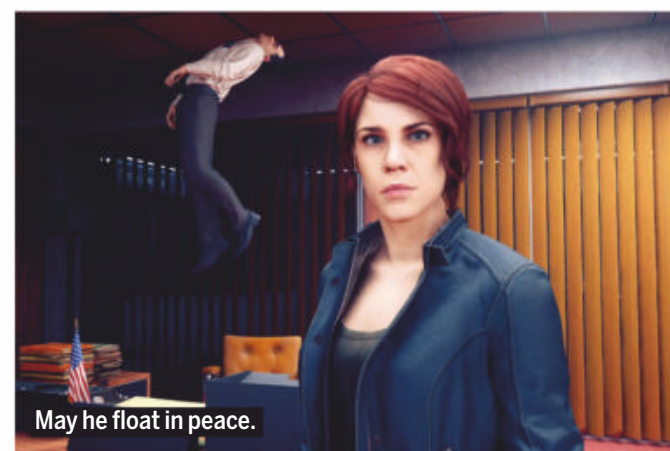
Slay the Spire is like being given a toolbox, and realising that if you want to survive you'll need to figure out a way to turn a hammer and a box of nails into a sniper rifle. *Monster Train* is like ordering a job lot of fireworks off the dark web and realising if you can tape enough of them together, you'll have a thermonuclear bomb.

DEAL ME IN

Some cards are amazing right out of the gate. Maybe as the run goes on, they get less useful, but maybe with the right combo they get even more ridiculous. Some cards seem awful – maybe they are, or maybe you're just not looking at them from the right angle. Halfway through a run you'll have picked your strategy – but a new card or artefact will tempt you to try and twist it in a totally new direction. By the end, you're either firing on a hundred cylinders, or you're dead – overwhelm, or be totally overwhelmed.

It's broken, it's ridiculously unbalanced, and it's so good. Its step further into the world of organised chaos keeps me coming back again and again. *Slay the Spire* will always have my heart, but *Monster Train* is an exhilarating fling. ■

A guy being blown away by polygons in a '90s video card ad.



“You can still appreciate the art design and the lighting tech with dead guys”

CONTROL is infinitely photographable

After upgrading my GPU to an RTX 2070 Super, I picked *Control* to be my first ‘RTX On’ experience.

It’s a good game to play for any reason, but it’s also the best showcase of Nvidia’s ray tracing tech so far. It almost entirely takes place in a mid-20th century office building where glass, marble, steel, and concrete intersect in hard-edged geometric patterns, reflecting fluorescent grids, green CRT monitors, and interdimensional sun beams. I oohed and awed at the reflections for a while, but now I’m mostly taking selfies with dead guys.

I swear I started out using *Control*’s photo mode to take tasteful shots of cool-looking stone cubes. I also snapped a few pics of the power plant control room, focusing on its glowing switches and their reflections on the floor. But then as I was looking for another scene to screenshot, I tapped the telekinesis key and instead of grabbing a desk chair, or a hunk of concrete, Jesse picked up a dead guy with the ‘stuck out tongue winking eye’ emoji face. That was that for the tasteful stuff.

▶ **TYLER WILDE**



THIS MONTH
Took pictures of pretty reflections and dead guys.

ALSO PLAYED
Valorant, *Generation Zero*

You can still appreciate Remedy’s art design and the lighting tech with dead guys. Zoom into a corpse’s eye far enough and you can see Jesse’s calm expression reflected in the cornea. Jam a guy’s head up against a ceiling, and the yellow from his hardhat will reflect onto the concrete.

While observing the way a guy’s bloody, unhinged jaw glistens just right, I was reminded (not for the first time) of the enormity of the 30-year-long effort to make videogame graphics look cooler. Even just 20 years ago in *Max Payne*, the main character’s face was a flat plane plastered with a picture of Sam Lake. Now he and Remedy can make a

ZOOM INTO A CORPSE’S EYE FAR ENOUGH AND YOU CAN SEE JESSE REFLECTED IN IT

character whose eyelashes are individually rendered, and then put that character’s face in a reflection on a corpse’s eyeball.

DAVID BAILEY RIGHT HERE

It can feel like this progress was inevitable, but it wasn’t inevitable at all. It’s taken a huge, global effort to create the software and hardware to render eyelashes and bounce light off of hardhats. I can’t help but wonder what else humankind might’ve built if not for Jesse’s eyelashes, but given that I’m not going outside much right now, I’m grateful for *Control*’s photo mode, which has been a fun time killer – on top of the free camera and FOV slider, focus control is a nice inclusion for portrait taking.

All the stopping to pose Jesse with floating dead guys may be distracting me from playing the game, but I can’t help the impulse to take a photo when I see something funny or some lighting that looks cool, either in games or out in the world. I’m not sure if screenshot keys or smartphone cameras started that, and as I watch others share screens of the games they’re playing right now – it’s a lot of *Animal Crossing* – I wonder if people will perceive any difference between them in another 30 years. ■

“The half-day gap between trial and error makes it an infuriating process”

Seven days in the darkness of **THE LONGING**

Here in the real world, it's Saturday. In the eternal night of *The Longing*'s caves, it's impossible to tell what day it is. What I do know, though, is how much time remains: 71 days, 15 hours. See, *The Longing* plays out over the course of 400 days, in real-time, while you wait for a mythical king to awake. Just under 72 days? Nearly there then.

It's been over a month since I last played, but the seconds tick away all the same. The Shade is right where I left him. He rubs his eyes – those huge yellow headlamps – and tries reasoning with me. “Maybe I should return to my home?”

But that wouldn't be much fun to read, would it? So I send him deeper into the cave system, up a spiderweb that took long weeks to form, in search of adventure.

It's Sunday, 70 days remain. Yesterday, the Shade found his way through a mushroom-lined grotto, to a seeming dead end. But he's got an ace up his sleeve – or rather a pickaxe. I left the Shade chipping away at the rock. Today, I find him asleep, the dead end not having

ALEX SPENCER



THIS MONTH
Stayed inside, dreaming of the sunlit world outside.

ALSO PLAYED
Control, Gears Tactics

noticeably budged. I wake him, interrupt his murmurings about dreams of a place beyond the caves, point him back to the task at hand.

He then hits granite. “I now have 5x Disappointments.” Tell me about it, pal. The rest of the day is spent testing other dead ends, until we find one that doesn't offer any resistance. I leave the Shade to his job.

By Monday, there's a newly uncovered chamber to explore. It holds more fungi, and an unreachable ledge. The Shade plucks one of the mushrooms, but I accidentally tell him to scoff it, plunging us back into darkness. Still, this gives me an idea...

BY MONDAY, THERE'S A NEWLY UNCOVERED CHAMBER TO EXPLORE

The next few days are spent picking and planting. The half-day gap between trial and error makes it an infuriating process, but soon, I have a 'shroom perfectly positioned to send the Shade up onto the ledge.

TIME MARCHES ON

It's Thursday now. The ledge leads to a tunnel, one that gradually narrows into darkness. The Shade's eyes bob in the inky black, he emerges into what could be called the light. It reveals a jagged finger of cliff. As the Shade nears its tip, he says, “I can feel my end nearing.” At the very edge, a bottom prompt pops up “commit suicide”. I wasn't ready for this.

Friday. After sleeping on it, I've decided this is a trick. One last leap of faith standing between us and the world outside. I hit the button, click through multiple variants on “are you sure?” until I reach the final warning, in big red letters. My finger hovers.

I can't bring myself to do it. Calling up the screen of bookmarked locations, I send the Shade back home, to the tidy little cavern we haven't seen in real-world months. We'll just wait out the end of the game by the warmth and light of the fire instead. It's only 65 days away. ■





EVE ONLINE

EVE Online's Invasion expansion is reaching a climax. *By Steven Messner*

Last July, *EVE Online* players fell victim to an alien invasion of unprecedented scale. Across the lawless outer reaches of New Eden, where *EVE*'s player alliances battle for territory, fleets of alien vessels began attacking player-owned starbases and ships. It was chaos, but it was just another chapter in an ongoing story that's been slowly unravelling in *EVE Online* for the past six years. And, as of May 26, *EVE Online*'s alien invasion is headed towards a climactic finale where the fate of the galaxy is up to players to decide.

Simply titled *Invasion*, this year-long expansion has seen *EVE Online* players go to war with the Triglavian Collective, a ritualistic and technologically superior alien race that was exiled from their home system for reasons that are not entirely known. Over the past year, the Triglavians have been invading different areas of *EVE Online*'s virtual galaxy, New Eden, disrupting player activity in the area and all the while building mysterious structures. But, with the third and final chapter of *Invasion* that released on May 26 alongside a different update that makes *EVE Online*'s large-scale PvP much scarier, the Triglavian invasion is heating up significantly.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 6, 2003

DEVELOPER
CCP Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
eveonline.com

ALIEN COVENANTS

Dozens of star systems across *EVE Online*'s relatively safe region known as High-sec are already filled with Triglavian ships exchanging volleys with the combined might of *EVE Online*'s NPC human empires, known as Edencom. Though these fights are similar to previous Triglavian invasions, players can now decide who to fight for. These battles can happen spontaneously, with players encouraged to get involved and destroy enemy ships, and each other.

What's to be gained by enlisting with one side or the other isn't exactly clear, though. Players can now earn 'standings' with both Triglavians and Edencom – a kind of resource that typically unlocks new features, grants passive benefits like lower taxes, or unlocks more rewarding missions from NPCs. Players are beginning to spot new Triglavian and Edencom structures in space, and rumours perpetuated by CCP Games itself suggests that some brand new ships and destructive weapons are on the way, which will likely require a certain standing with your chosen faction.

This is especially exciting because Triglavian ships are remarkable among *EVE Online*'s different archetypes. Their main weapon is a laser beam with damage that increases exponentially the longer it hits a target, for example. And Triglavian pilot ships, called Xordazh, are a staggering 60km in length – nearly quadruple the size of *EVE Online*'s biggest ship.

Not having any idea of what happens next is frustrating, but it's also why *Invasion* is so compelling. Compared to other MMOs, which often meticulously spell out every detail of their updates, *EVE Online* is keeping players on their toes and it feels like anything is possible at this point. "One thing is certain," CCP Games creative director Bergur Finnbogason said during a recent livestream announcing the update, "New Eden will never be the same again." What that means is anyone's

EVE ONLINE IS KEEPING PLAYERS ON THEIR TOES

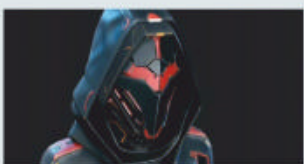
guess, but I'd bet that the Triglavians will become a permanent faction in *EVE Online*, dividing the relatively peaceful regions of High-sec space into two opposing sides.

At the same time, *EVE Online* is getting more dangerous in a very different way. Alongside the *Invasion Chapter 3* update, CCP Games also launched the *Forsaken Fortress* update that ups the stakes of PvP conflicts. Now, *EVE Online*'s player-built Citadels can be destroyed in just one attack instead of being arbitrarily spaced out over three fights. And when Citadels are destroyed, they'll drop everything that was stored inside of them instead of jettisoning the loot to a secret location for the defenders to retrieve. It's two changes that will make player conflicts in *EVE* a lot bloodier and more exciting.

But the real treat will be what happens next. Though *EVE Online* has always been about the stories players tell, *Invasion* represents something new: an organic narrative jointly created by players and CCP Games that points toward a big paradigm shift in New Eden. ■

MEET AND GREET

The alien races involved in the Triglavian Invasion



TRIGLAVIANS

A powerful armada in exile that lurks in the extra-dimensional Abyssal Deadspace. Triglavians are now invading New Eden.



DRIFTERS

Androids created by the corpses of players, Drifters are at war with both Triglavians and players – though no one is sure why.



SLEEPER DRONES

Spaceship-sized AI remnants of a long-dead race, Sleeper Drones are responsible for creating the Drifters, no one knows why.

Expect more new ships to be appearing in *EVE* over the summer.



No one really knows what the Triglavians are up to.



Triglavian ship beam cannons are a deadly new weapon in *EVE*.

Don't you hate when a bug sticks to your windshield?



Those bullets won't even scratch the paint.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Superheroes fit perfectly into *GTA V*'s sandbox of carnage. *By Chris Livingston*

blowing up cars with a rocket launcher is fun, just wait until you're doing it with your bare hands.

Plus, you can always pretend the Los Santos Police Department are the bad guys. Considering their general recklessness and tendency to react to minor fender benders with a barrage of gunfire, it's not much of a stretch.

But let's be honest: as a superhero you're probably going to wind up killing a bunch of innocent or at least semi-innocent people. To ease into that concept, it's a good idea to start out by becoming a superhero who doesn't just fight crime, but fights anything that's willing to fight back – the Hulk. The green behemoth isn't exactly known for self control and historically he spends just about as much time fighting US Army soldiers and his best friends as he does fighting criminals. Hulk smash! And Hulk not really concerned all that much who Hulk smash! Right?

**HULK SMASH!
HULK NOT
REALLY CONCERNED
ALL THAT MUCH
WHO HULK SMASH!**

ANGER MANAGEMENT

It's also a nice opportunity to engage in a bit of roleplaying. Here's what I do: rather than simply activating the mod and instantly transforming into Hulk, I just play the game as I normally would. I drive around, I do crimes, I go shopping and sightseeing, I get into fights with locals. And when things get stressful for my character – maybe I get into a car accident, or get shot at by a cop, or maybe someone is just a little bit rude to me on the street – that's when I tap the key that turns me into Hulk. Now, finally, I'm angry enough to unleash some all-green shirtless destruction upon Los Santos.

There are several Hulk mods out there, but I'd recommend JulioNIB's *Hulk v3* mod, and the Hulk skins (Avengers & Age of Ultron) by TheMadBreaker. JulioNIB's mod gives your Hulk lots of great powers, including super strength, fast healing and a super-jump that can propel you up through the air and across great distances. But it does way more than that. You can actually pick up puny



They're probably guilty of something.

Los Santos has a massive crime problem, and no one knows that better than anyone who plays *Grand Theft Auto V*... because we spend most of our time committing those horrible crimes. But when the thrill of bank heists, chases, and shootouts with the cops get a little on the repetitive side, there's a super way to freshen things up. Superhero mods!

There's one *small* issue with using mods to become a superhero in *GTA V*, and it's that the biggest criminal (you) vanishes, leaving the superhero you've transformed into without a major villain to defeat. Thankfully, some of the mods here provide a suitable superpowered enemy you can spawn and battle. But even without a supervillain to super-fight, it's still tons of fun to use incredible powers in *GTA V*. If you think

CRIME PAYS *For an even less heroic experience, try these villain mods*



MAGNETO

Pull planes from the sky, derail trains, and create car tornadoes using magnetism.



VENOM

Like Spider-Man, he's got webs, but unlike Spider-Man, he can straight-up eat people.



GREEN GOBLIN

A glider is a great way to get around. Pumpkin bombs are a great way to blow it up.



THANOS

Yep, he can snap, and half the NPCs around him will dissolve into dust. I don't feel so good.

» humans and carry them around, throw them, and even pick up one in each hand and smash them together. You can punch and stomp, Hulk's go-to moves, but you can also grab streetlight poles, rip them out of the ground, and swing them around like a giant baseball bat. Why dirty your knuckles punching a bus when you can use a giant metal club?

GREEN FINGERS

Even just striding through the city as Hulk makes me feel super-powered because cracks in the sidewalk and pavement appear with every step I take. And when the cops show up – and they will, quickly, because you're smashing everything and throwing people all over the damn place – there's a special move just for them. Target a police helicopter and you can leap into the sky and grab it, and then actually yank the chopper pilot out of his seat, fling him into the air, and then destroy the helicopter while you're still clinging to it. Awesome! That's for shooting at Hulk just because Hulk was smashing cars and throwing people around! Maybe it's not the nicest thing for a superhero to do, but it's still supremely satisfying. Hulk doesn't mean to be bad, he just has some extremely devastating temper tantrums.

When you're done smashing absolutely everything, you might try a more nimble hero. And when you think of a city filled with crime, gangs and semi-incompetent cops, it's easy to see that Spider-Man would fit perfectly into Los Santos. Tall buildings to swing from? Check. A bunch of people to shoot webs at? Check. An inexhaustible supply of cops to embarrass? Big check.

Again, I'd use JulioNIB's *Spider-Man* mod because it's packed full of Spidey goodness. Swinging through Los Santos doesn't feel quite as good as it does in the official *Spider-Man* game, but the mod still works pretty darn well. Leap into the air, tap the

web button, and as long as you're close to a building, off you'll swing.

Of course, that's not all you can do with webs. You can do that Spidey slingshot move, where he shoots two webs ahead of himself and then yanks himself like a rocket toward his target. You can slowly lower yourself from up high while hanging upside-down, perfect for attempting to get the fabled Spider-Man/Mary Jane rainy alleyway kiss – though I'm pretty sure none of Los Santos' citizens are going to smooch you. They might try to punch you or shoot you, though. That's OK: you've got plenty of webbing to use on any hostiles you come across.

If you can't kiss 'em, sproing 'em. Shoot a web at someone, and then attach it to a moving car. Sproing!



SHOOT A WEB AT SOMEONE, AND THEN ATTACH IT TO A MOVING CAR. SPROING!

They'll be yanked away and down the street, courtesy of your not-so-friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. You can also yank someone to you and perform a backflip kick, perfect for quickly taking out gang members or cops. Leave people and cars dangling from rooftops or telephone poles, just like Spidey does after foiling a crime. And you can web up a person or a car, swing them around in circles, and then send them sailing through the air. See, Spidey can take down choppers too.

There are lots of other traditional superheroes you can add to *GTA V* with mods, including some from the DC universe like Superman and The Flash. Or you can drop the facade and embrace your villainy with some high-powered bad guys like Venom, Thanos and Magneto. But let me



pose this important question: can a car be a superhero?

I'm gonna make that case by pointing to KITT, the sentient car from *Knight Rider* – the goofy David Hasslehoff show from the mid-1980s. I think KITT qualifies as superhero: he's bulletproof, he can drive much faster than a normal car, he can fly (a little bit, anyway, with his Turbo Boost power), and he helps out people who get in trouble (most often David Hasslehoff himself). KITT even has a secret identity because he doesn't look like a superbeing, he looks like a 1982 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. The only time his cover is blown is when he starts talking, or when bullets are bouncing off him, or when he's driving a million miles per hour and turbo boosting through the air. Also, the glowing red vroom-vroom light on his grill is a little giveaway that he's not just a common car. I still wish my real car had a red vroom-vroom light. Maybe someday I'll finally install one... on my 2012 Nissan Versa. Look, it's not as cool as a Trans Am, but it is black, at least.

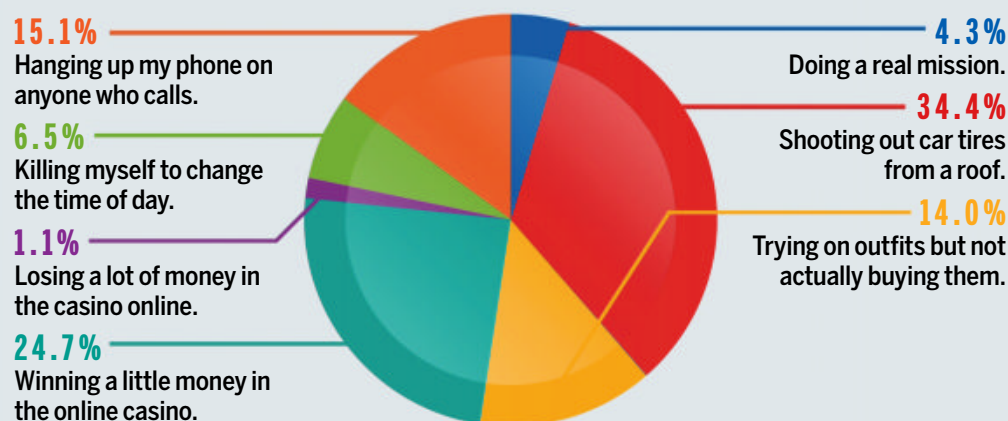
KNIGHT AND DAY

So, the hell with it, I'm putting KITT on my superhero list, and recommending you do too, with the *Knight Rider: KITT* mod created by modder 3id. And unlike most other car mods, KITT can drive himself around even when you're not behind the wheel. Once it's enabled, you just have to wait for a few seconds in-game and you'll hear KITT's reassuring vroom-vroom noise as he drives himself over to you and – this is really the best part – opens his driver's side door so you can get in. It's such a nice touch that the door pops open when you get close to your loyal and intelligent car.

And you don't need to get in right away – it's pretty cool to just walk or drive a different car around the city for a while because KITT will follow you like the faithful companion he is. When you do finally climb into KITT, you can have him autodriven you to a waypoint, blast through the air with a Turbo Boost, and even drive on two wheels (KITT did this on the show from time to time – I don't recall it ever actually being useful for foiling crimes, I think it was mainly to show off some stunt driving). And if you get into trouble with the cops, there's not much to worry about. Like I said, KITT is bulletproof.

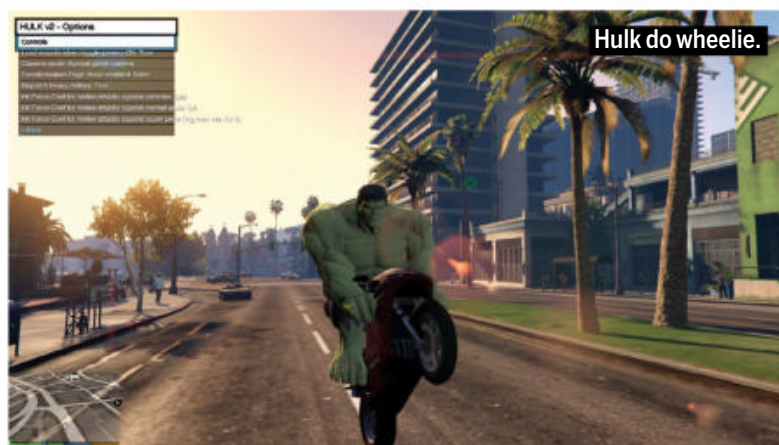
Which superhero will you choose – the furious monster, the wall-crawler, or the snarky, self-driving car? There's no wrong answer. Not when there's crime to fight. ■

TIME FLIES *How I spend my time in GTA V, charted*





Does whatever a spider can
– like fighting prison gangs.



Hulk do wheelie.



No shirt, no shoes, but Hulk
get service anyway.



CONQUER MINECRAFT DUNGEONS

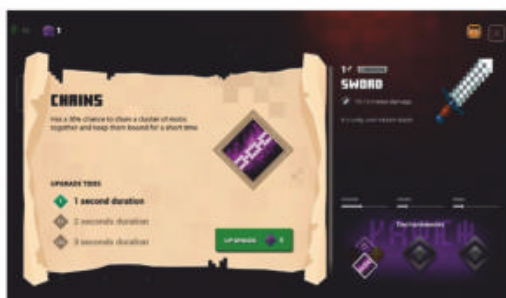
Amass emeralds and arcane enchantments to best Mojang's dungeon crawler. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

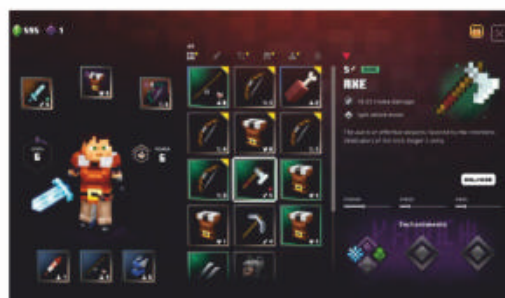
TIME
Two hours

VITAL LINKS
Top tips:
bit.ly/36W33S4
Best builds:
bit.ly/3eC4TKj
Enchantments:
bit.ly/2Mh2BnP



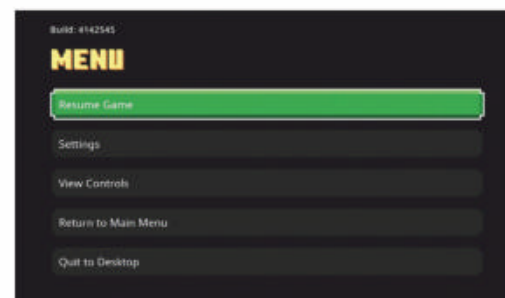
BEWITCHING BOONS

1 Every weapon and armour set has up to three slots for enchantments. You're awarded one enchantment point with each level you gain and you can invest them in various abilities that can be upgraded twice to increase their power.



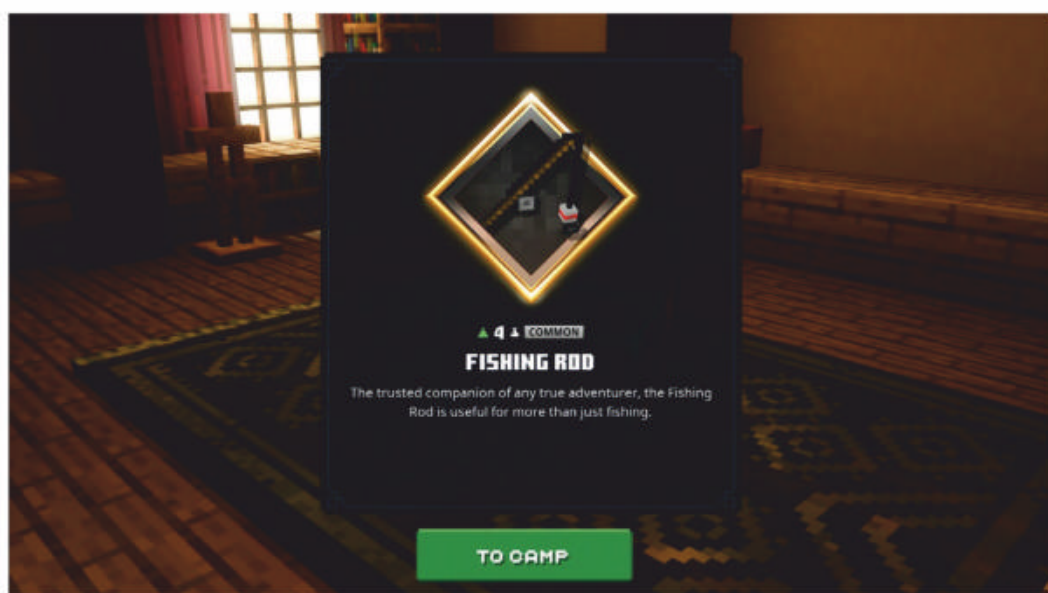
SCRAP HEAP

2 When you find better gear, salvage the weapons and armour you no longer need. Not only does this restore your previously spent enchantment points on the old items, but you'll also get emeralds to put towards something new.



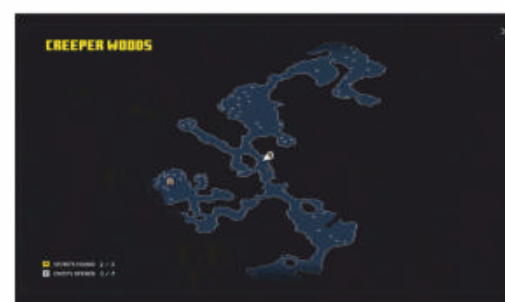
PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

3 Note: The action doesn't stop if you're tinkering with your inventory mid-level, even if you're playing an offline game. So, either restrict your tweaking to your camp or make sure you've cleared the surrounding area of nefarious creepers first.



ARTEFACTING

4 Artefacts are special abilities that you can use to turn the tide against the Arch-Illager's army. Use them to temporarily increase your speed, summon animal soldiers, and unleash fireworks.

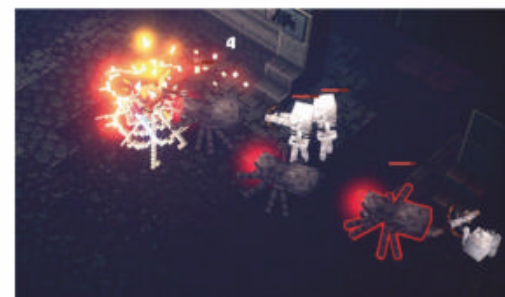


THE VIOLENT CARTOGRAPHER

5 View a simplified map with Tab or get the full perspective with M. Either way, use it to spot special routes and secrets. Icons indicating these will appear on your map if you get close, so keep your eyes peeled for them.

ANIMAL HATER

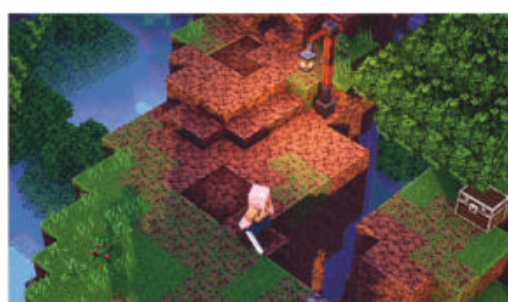
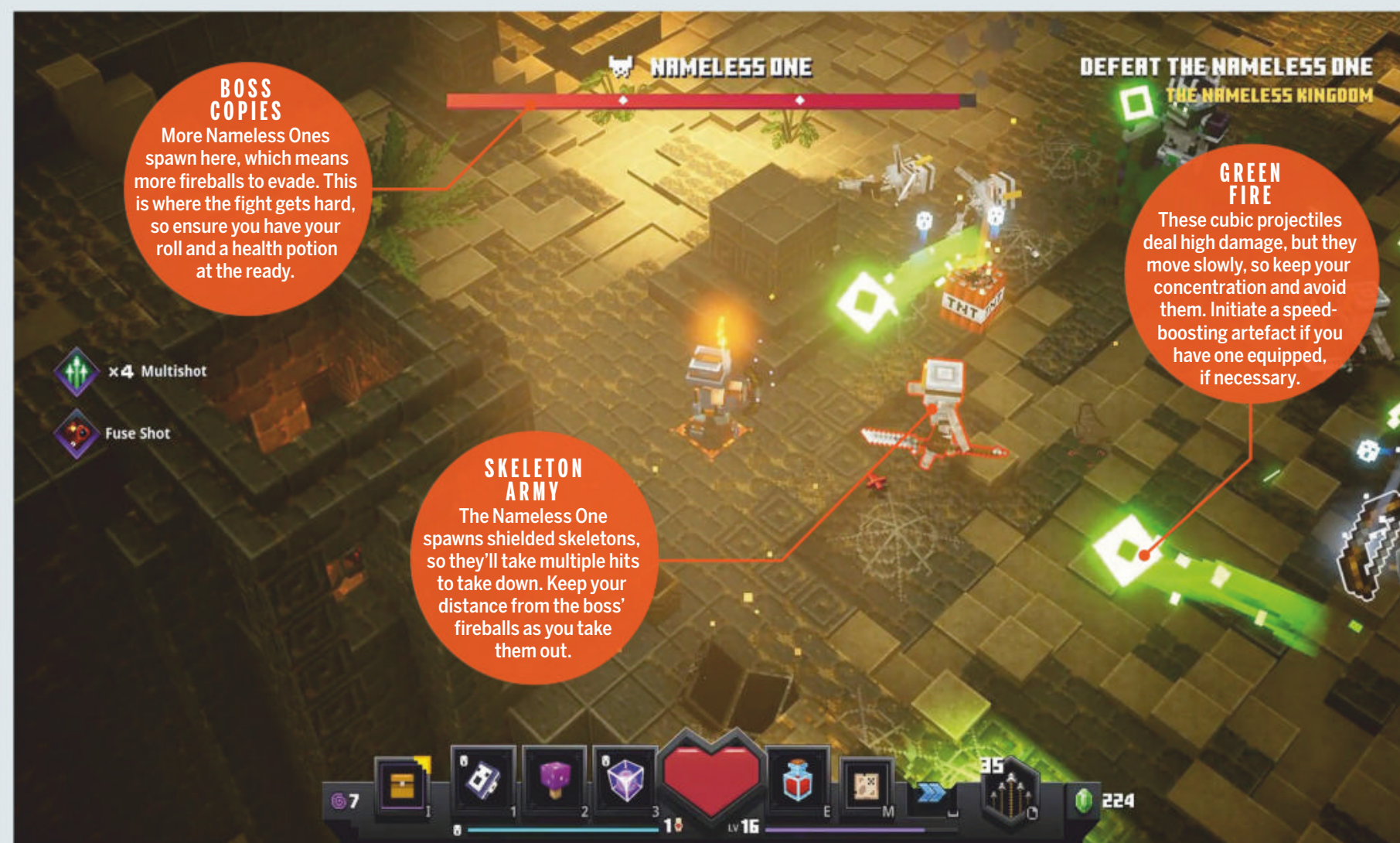
6 The blocky fauna of *Minecraft Dungeons* may be cute, but they're also very helpful. When killed, cows and sheep drop resources and occasionally emeralds.



NEW TRICKS

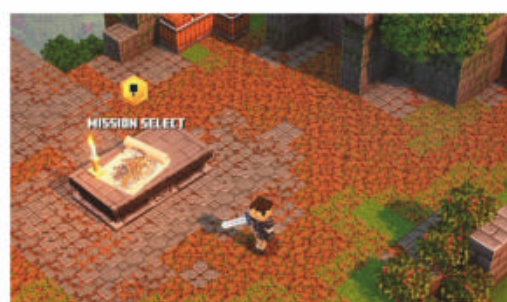
7 Even seasoned *Minecraft* players will need to be on their guard: not all enemies in *Dungeons* behave in quite the same way as they would in its predecessor. Spiders, for example, fling mobility-reducing webs, so keep your wits about you.

THE NAMELESS ONE *Prepare for the necromancer's three key attacks*



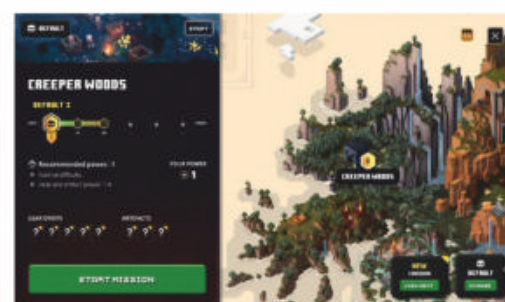
ROLL WITH IT

8 Using Space to roll isn't just handy in escaping a volley of enemy arrows: you can also use it to jump short distances. See some treasure just a hop away? Use roll so you can, er, be rolling in it. Artefacts can also affect rolls and turn them into attacks.



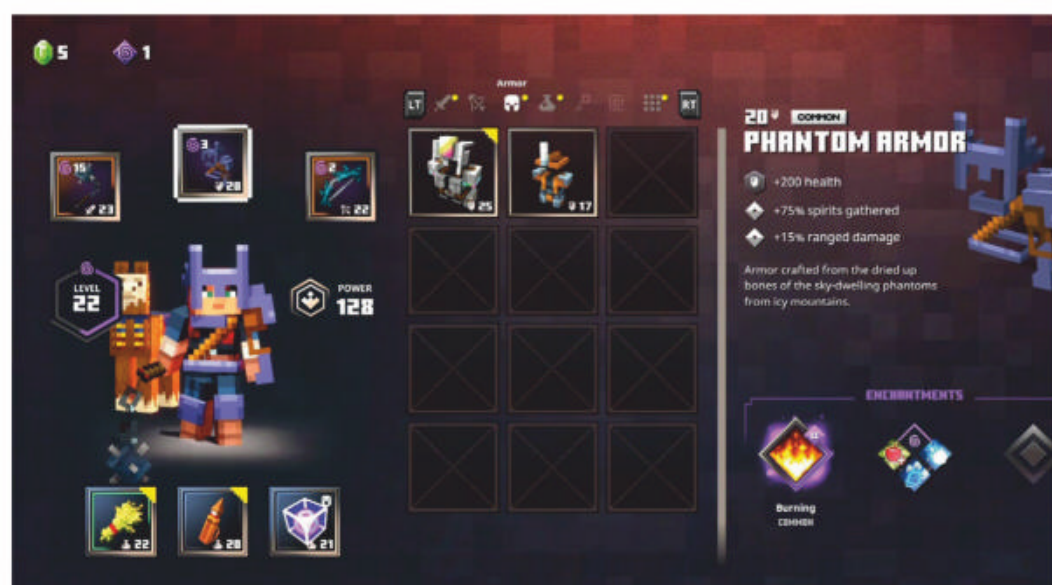
BASE CAMP

9 Your camp is a great space in which you can unwind after a particularly testing quest, but there's more to it than meets the eye. After convalescing in your treasure-filled home, search outside for the chests and vendors that appear.



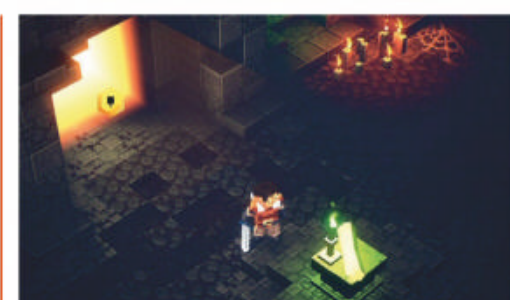
HARD TIMES

10 On top of the overall difficulty settings of Default, Adventure, and Apocalypse, you can also change the 'threat' of each level. Higher mission difficulties lead to better and more powerful loot, so check if your power level is up to snuff.



BUILDING BLOCKS

11 With weapons, enchantments, armour, and artefacts to equip, there's plenty of scope for different builds. It pays to have a setup in mind for burning through mobs, and another for boss fights.



TRAVELLER'S TALES

12 Religiously following the mission marker will get you through the game quicker, but you'll miss out on plenty of goodies. If you don't want to miss any secrets or cool areas, head off the beaten path. The Arch-Illager can wait.

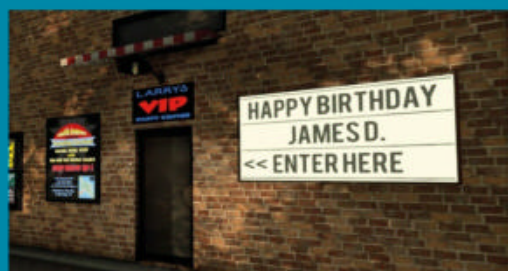


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE COIN GAME'S ENDLESS ROBOT BIRTHDAY PARTY

My uncle's pockets are infinitely deep on coin-op island. *By James Davenport*



LEFT: The arcade has strip club vibes.



It's my birthday and my uncle is footing the bill. My birthday is today. And tomorrow. My birthday stretches from now and into infinity, spilling out over the horizon. My birthday eats the sky and the stars, it laps up the morning light and spits out chips and soda. On this island of knock-off Chuck E Cheese arcades and dimly lit roadside gas stations, I can spend as much money on credits as I want and play games like skee-ball until my skin is bread crust. In *The Coin Game* it could well be my birthday until the day I die. These are the perks of Birthday Mode.

The Coin Game doesn't readily give off the impression that it's a simulated, ongoing episode of *The Twilight Zone*. A quick look at the Steam page and you might get the idea it's a one-man passion project, an Early Access release that uses stock assets to prop up a simple ode to mechanical arcade games. And it is. You can play *The Coin Game* as a simple Chuck E Cheese analogue. You can exchange tickets for cheap toys. You can catch a live performance from an animatronic band, Teddy and the Ticket Stealers, featuring a Rastafarian banana. You can ask your uncle for more money as many times as you like. But I want to go outside. So I do.

ALL CHANGE

It's night, around 2.00am. The moon is just bright enough to show the black horizon of trees and buildings. I wander into the warehouse parking lot across the street. A truck blazes by, nearly clipping me. The driver, an egg-shaped robot, stares ahead with the blank intensity of a face that can't emote, because it can't. It doesn't

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2019 (Early Access)

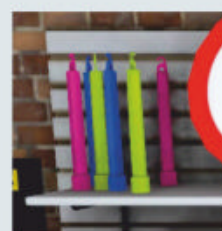
EXPECT TO PAY
£6

OUR REVIEW
N/A

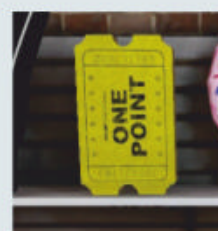
LINK
devotid.com/coin-game

TWEE MARKET

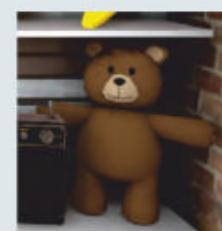
The best and worst ticket prizes



1 GLOW STICK
500 tickets



STUFFED TICKET
950 tickets



TEDDY BEAR
35,000 tickets



BOOM BOX
100,000 tickets

have the parts. Have I mentioned that the island is solely populated by these things? Little egg-shaped robot kids, screaming and kicking and laughing all over the arcade. Taller adult eggs act as chaperones, some wandering the island aimlessly like me.

But when I look down, I see flesh and blood. I see two legs and two arms, one of which has a tight grip on a bundle of tickets. Nothing in *The Coin Game* acknowledges this key juxtaposition, that I'm the only human, but it makes me wonder if I'm stuck inside some kind of kid prison or wild experiment. Maybe

protector. I head inside. A bell jingles, or maybe I imagined it. I can't help it – I feel like I've been here before, some roadside gas station off I-90 in the lonelier bits of the Pacific Northwest. I use my uncle's money to buy some cheese puffs and soda, then head back into the dark.

HUNGRY GOOSE GAME

As I head for the coast, it dawns on me that only minutes ago I was moshing with little egg bots to the music of Teddy and the Ticket Stealers and dumping tokens into a pachinko machine looking to score a huge ticket prize. I look up and now I'm at home – I have a house, apparently – and my pet swan-geese is hungry. I pour it some food which it gobbles down heartily before walking through a goose-shaped door and into the bathroom, where it uses the toilet much like a human might. *The Coin Game* is a goddamn trip.

And it keeps unravelling. There's a carnival on the coast, with rides like a ferris wheel and bumper cars and a rocking pirate ship, all of which are fully interactive. Hop on. There's cheap food and a calliope puffing out jubilant tunes. *The Coin Game* is a horrific, layered fantasy realm made for twisted preteens. It's going to get weirder too. A survival mode is on the way, where you'll need to do odd jobs like mowing lawns and paper delivery in order to buy your own tickets. Food, too, because you'll be able to starve. Don't miss this odd, special game that couldn't exist on another platform. ■

YOU CAN CATCH A LIVE PERFORMANCE FROM AN ANIMATRONIC BAND

I'm just a plaything for some omnipotent being and this is my elaborate cage. Maybe it doesn't matter because it's my birthday.

I keep walking. On the other side of the parking lot: another road and a small strip mall, the Islandville Market, home to a convenience store, a credit union and a boutique. Cars come and go during the night. So I sit and watch them for a while. The ambiance is perfect, the soft glow of the grimy Islandville Market sign like another, smaller, moon.

I walk through the trees in the dark for a while until I stumble onto a gas station. Some egg bots are charging outside in a huge surge



RIGHT: The golf cart accepts arcade credit, of course.



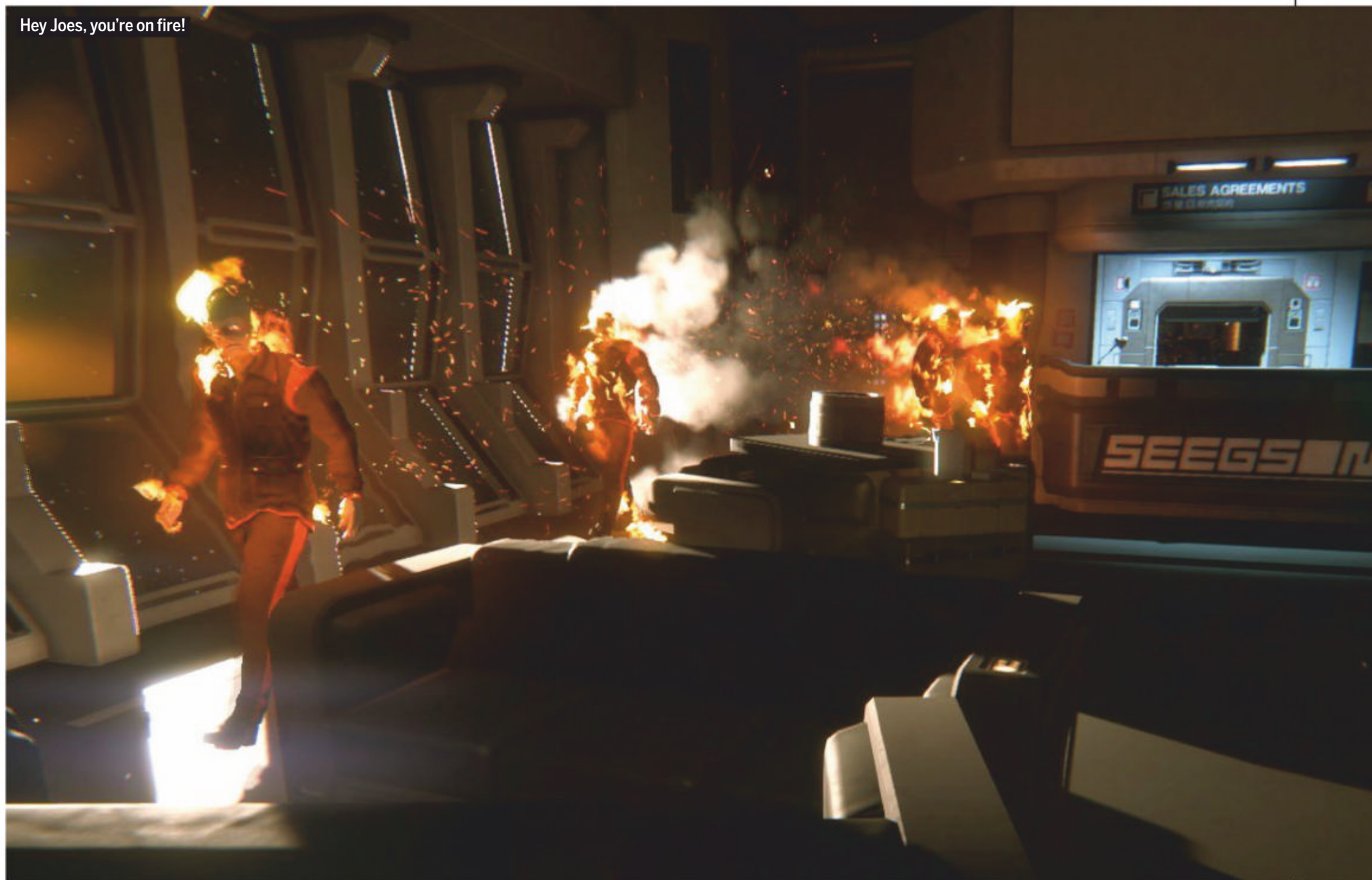


REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

The first time you see the thing is a remarkable moment in PC gaming

Hey Joes, you're on fire!



ALIEN: ISOLATION

A terrifying audiovisual masterpiece. *By Tom Senior*

Alien's Xenomorph is one of cinema's best known monsters, but at what point does the creature become boring? The comics and movies that rose to feed Alien's hungry fandom have reduced the creature to a cartoon villain. The Xenomorph has battled Batman, Superman, and the Predator. What do you do with a monster that the audience has seen so often?

You hide it. *Alien: Isolation's* Xenomorph hunts in the ship's vents, waiting to drop down on its prey. Directional sound cues hint at its presence, creating excruciating paranoia. Was that clunk some pneumatic operation of the space station? Or the creature moving just above the ceiling panels? Then, when

the monster finally descends it uncoils gracefully, enormous and utterly terrifying.

Creative Assembly chose to adapt the Xenomorph from the very first film, before it became a drone in a hive army. This thing is eight feet tall, and you can tell from the thudding of its footsteps that it's heavy. That gives you a clue as to where it is, which is useful as a player, but it also sells the monster's power. The first time you actually see the thing is a remarkable moment in PC gaming, and it marks the beginning of a sweaty 15-hour game of hide and seek that becomes more hellish with every passing hour.

ABOVE ITS STATION

You play as Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen Ripley from the first few films. You travel to the Sevastopol space station to recover the flight recorder of the doomed *Nostromo* from the original *Alien* movie. The space station has descended into chaos. A single alien's campaign of terror leaves the crew surviving in pockets, being picked off one by one.

It's hard to believe that *Alien: Isolation* is six years old. The station is beautifully modelled, and displays huge respect and understanding of the source material. The

smooth padded bulkheads of the communal areas contrast with the harsh industrial corridors in the guts of the vessel. Important areas have the optimistic sheen of excitable '60s science fiction spaceships, emulating the *Mother* hub in the original *Alien* film. You spend most of your time going cautiously through dimly lit engineering corridors, clad in dark grates and backlit fans.

The utilitarian architecture of these vessels express *Alien's* pessimistic vision of the future, in which employees are contractually obliged to maintain titanic vessels to generate profit they will never see. The Sevastopol's terminal messages expose contractual disagreements and management squabbles, and an organisation that can barely come to accept that the universe's deadliest predator is on board – people are disappearing, but they fret about the next shipment going late.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2014

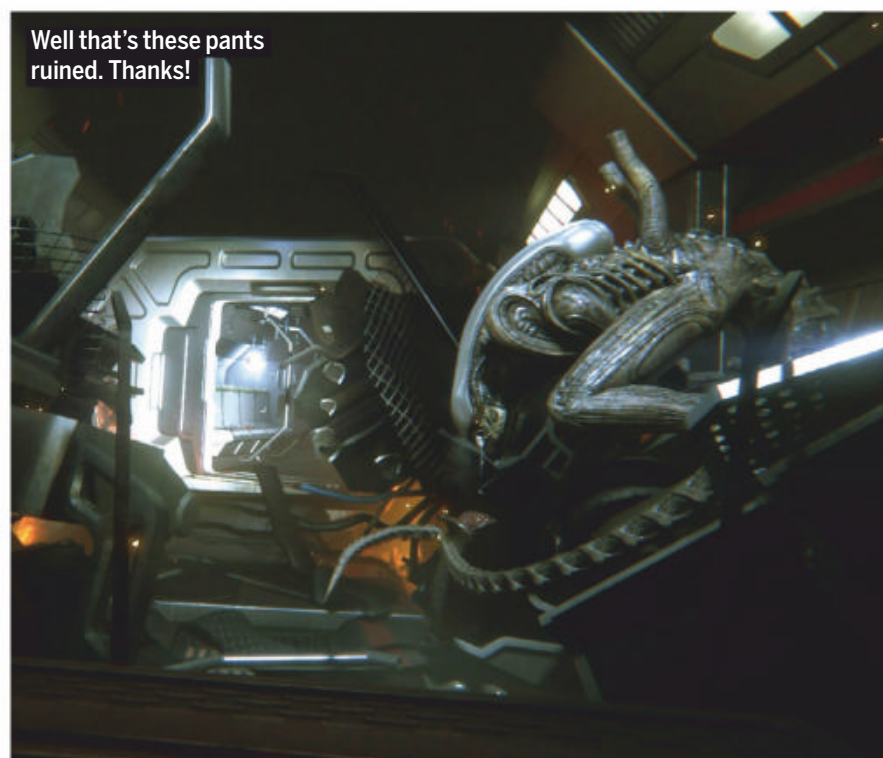
PUBLISHER
SEGA

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

LINK
alienisolation.com



In space no one can hear you dock.



Well that's these pants ruined. Thanks!



Well until they turn on you at least.

It's good worldbuilding. What makes *Alien: Isolation* exceptional is that it applies the same thorough devotion to authenticity to every aspect of the game. The retrofuturistic computer interfaces are completely right for the universe, but also serve as beautiful little works of art all by themselves. The UI draws influence from the simple glowing green forms you see on the scanner from *Alien*. The UI and screen interfaces distort and flicker as though they're being displayed through an old cathode ray tube display that's nearing its end. It's perfect for a world where futuristic technology has been cobbled together from parts that are designed to function at bare minimum capacity.

FILM STUDIES

Every animator, artist, designer, writer and composer has to be pointing in the same direction to achieve such a unified and tone-perfect aesthetic. Audiovisually, the game is mostly interested in recreating *Alien* as a cinematic object. Post processing effects are used to create visual distortion to mimic late '70s film stock. Chromatic aberration

creates the impression that you're looking at the world through the lens of the camera, rather than through the eyes of the character. Film grain and acutely observed lens flare complete the effect.

I often dislike these effects because they can create a distancing effect between me and the game world. I'm watching the game

GAME OVER, MAN *Know your enemy*



1 JAW JAW
One mouth isn't enough for this predator. Brushing its teeth is complicated.

2 BLOODY MESS
It's difficult to hurt it but don't let the Alien bleed on you, it's acid blood.

3 CLEVER GIRL
The Alien hunts methodically, and is sensitive to every noise you make.

through a host of visual filters designed to mimic defunct imperfections in old movie cameras – today's digital cameras happily capture super high definition images without distortion, and directors like JJ Abrams have actually added lensflare in to dazzle the viewer.

These techniques made no sense in *The Witcher 3*, for example, but I forgive *Alien: Isolation* because its mission is to recapture the look of the 1979 movie. Those effects are part of the texture of that world. Anything else would look too clean, too neat.

I also forgive it because it's an innovative horror game in its own right. Without the *Alien* licence there's plenty to praise about a game that puts so much effort into its monster AI. The Alien is a responsive nemesis that adapts to your preferred methods of evading it. Once it has found you in a closet, it will start checking closets. You might get used to hiding under tables only to be terrified when it learns to explore there. Watch, too, for the dripping of saliva from an overhead vent. Many times I have been caught wandering towards my next objective only to be swept up by the creature's claws.



Space suits make claustrophobia worse.

IT'S A TREAT TO REPLAY A GAME THAT TRULY GETS THE UNIVERSE

Sound is important too. There are small guns in the game, but you'd be a fool to use them. One gunshot will draw the Alien from any corner of the level. Be careful when sneaking around, because if you knock something over and the Alien is near, it will come to explore.

At points the terror can turn to frustration, as though the whole game is a repetitive series of trial-and-error scenarios. The game received a wide range of scores at release, and I would attribute most of the dissatisfaction to *Isolation's* save system. In an era when autosaving is expected in all games, it's a bold move to build a game around static save points scattered around the level.

It can be irritating to have to navigate the same sector of the ship repeatedly, but the save system forces you to move around and take risks. Brilliantly, it takes a few seconds for your game to actually save when you activate a point. You enter a card and a series of bulbs light up before your game saves. That stops you from just legging it to a save point and instantly moving through an area, and it creates intense moments when you know the creature is searching so close that it could spot you at any moment. It creates moments when you swear at the technology under your breath – c'mon c'mon c'mon, hurry up, stupid machine. It's Ellen Ripley screaming at the ship's AI at the end of *Alien*.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Isolation preserves the Alien's menace for a long time by removing it from the game for particular sections. This relies on its underrated second class of villain – the army of Working Joe androids that have, of course, gone rogue.

The Working Joes present a different challenge to the Alien. Firstly, you can actually fight them, though doing so requires you to spend scarce crafting resources on ammo. They are a lot dumber than the Xenomorph, but they are legion, and they patrol areas in patterns.

The game juggles these two enemies to create a changing sense of pace for the first two thirds of the game. *Alien: Isolation* does run too long, however. Once you've experienced the horror of going into a vent system with the Alien, and met facehuggers, you've seen everything that made the series famous. The plot pushes on, though, and the plight of the Sevastopol and Amanda Ripley's quest aren't quite enough to keep the momentum going until the very end.

Isolation also exposes some of the limitations of games as a medium, which are able to capture Alien's

hide-and-seek sections, and even more easily capture the space marine fantasy of the second film. The horror of *Alien* isn't purely in the creature itself, as masterfully designed as it is. *Alien* is about body horror, birth, parasites and the terrifying prospect of humans becoming victims of another creature's reproductive cycle. *Alien: Isolation* comes closer than any other game to recreating the look and feel of the universe, but can't explore the underlying psychology that makes the Alien truly scary. Ultimately, it's just a boogeyman. A smart, beautifully animated boogeyman, but in the end, just another videogame enemy with sharp claws.

It's hard to imagine how *Alien: Isolation* could have done better, though. We have seen some awful *Alien* games, so it's a treat to replay a game that truly gets the universe. It builds on the audiovisual design of the first film, and even enhances it. As we move through generations of ever-improving graphics engines, *Isolation* shows how much design and art direction matter. I can't imagine anyone making a better *Alien* game than this. ■

PHIL SAVAGE



It's the 14th remote meeting of the day, and on my screen is a patchwork of executives looking stern. "Videogames," I shout, banging my fist on my desk for effect, "... but on PC". Together, as one voice, they reply, "I think you're on mute".



APEX LEGENDS

apexlegends.com

→ It's 11.00pm, and my phone starts to buzz. It's Samuel – former PC Gamer editor-in-chief, current pal. "An hour of Apex?" he asks. It's 1.30am. We're jumping in for what we've promised ourselves will be the final match. It's 1.50am. We've just won. The adrenaline is pumping. We won't be getting much sleep tonight.



COMMAND & CONQUER REMASTERED COLLECTION

bit.ly/cncthang

→ Looking back we can appreciate how weird C&C's soundtrack was. It slaps, sure, but entire tracks are built around, for instance, a woman saying "just do it up" over and over again. Another, called C&C Thang, features an NWA-style west coast hiphop beat. It's utterly wild.



EASTSHADE

eastshade.com

→ During an eclipse, I use mirrors to redirect light from a statue towards a nearby plinth, activating a trapdoor that plunges me into the homely warren of an owl woman. She asks me a riddle, and I return later to present my answer in the form of a painting. She rewards me with a bottle of hallucinogenic tea.



DUSK

newblood.games

→ You know what? Sometimes it's fine if I can't talk to the monsters. Sometimes it's great not to be reminded that we're not so different, the villain who has done the bad things and I. Sometimes I have a gun and the cultists have chainsaws, and we all agree on the best way to resolve the matter.

MUST

PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Phil Savage



SEA OF THIEVES

seaofthieves.com

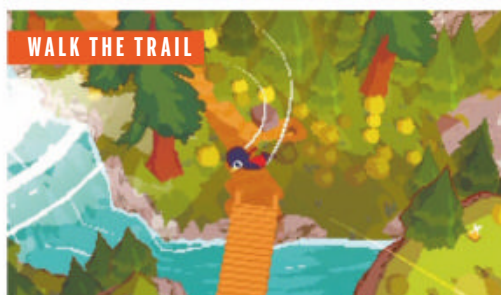
→ I've been playing this weekly with friends for around a year now, and my top tip is to always volunteer to sail the ship. That way everyone else will do the actually important stuff, like fishing and navigating and repairing the thing after you've crashed, and everyone just assumes you're in charge.



TALES FROM OFF-PEAK CITY, VOL. 1

cosmod.net

→ I've had it with pizza formalism. Mozzarella? Boring. Pepperoni? Yawn. The first volume of Cosmo D's anthology encourages you to create jazz slices for the sheer art of it. Chocolate and anchovy. Gummy worms and synthetic grey matter. Literally just sauce. Umm, yummm.



A SHORT HIKE

ashorthike.com

→ We don't give enough props to double jumping. It's a silly affair, but the joy of being able to spring mid-air into a second jump is a phenomenon that deserves more celebration. Here, you can go beyond the double jump – leaping continuously based on the number of feathers you've collected. Thus, it is good.



XCOM 2

xcom.com

→ I have no qualms about save scumming. I'm sure successfully walking the knife edge between success and failure is satisfying for some, but I'm not about to spend 40+ hours playing a campaign that I ultimately fail. I recently finished XCOM 2 and its expansion, and I quickloaded throughout.



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Take a Break

Gaming's overlooked holiday destinations



The A46

IN EUROTUCK SIMULATOR

Enjoy the wonderful sights and sounds of this historic motorway from the comfort of your own truck! It's the kind of spectacle only virtual worlds can provide.

★★★★☆



Blight Town

IN DARK SOULS

Take a romantic stroll across the rickety scaffolding as the sun sets through a tiny, tiny sliver over a gleaming poison swamp. See if you can spot a thrumming cloud of beautiful chaos mosquitos!

★★★★☆



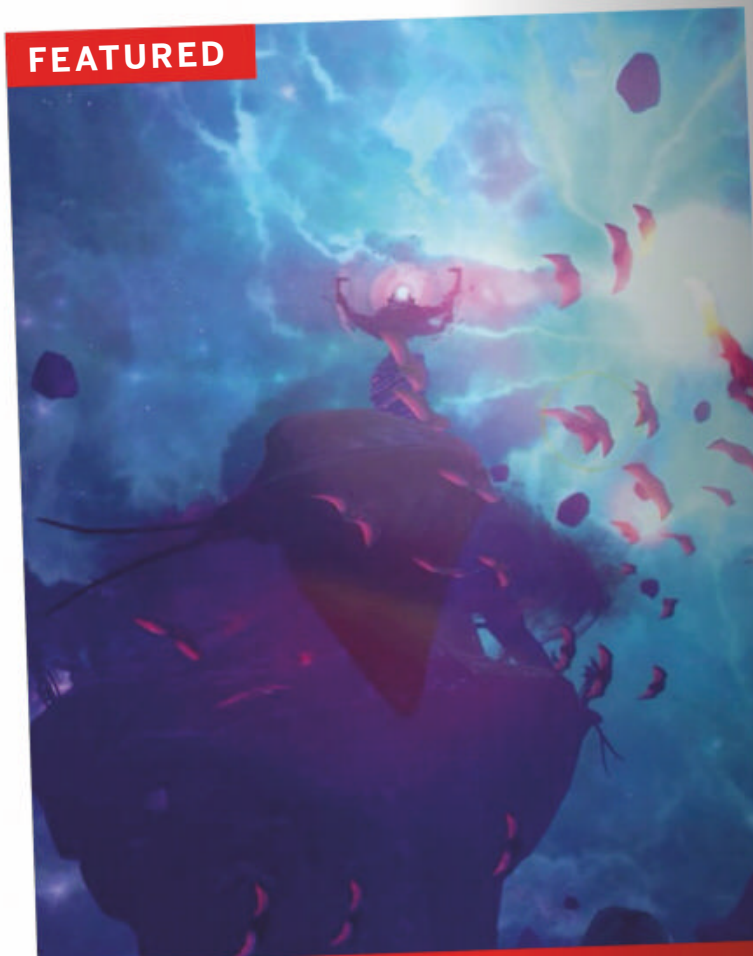
Rapture

IN BIOSHOCK

Get closer to ocean life than you ever thought possible – and a bracing swim is only ever an airlock away. Plus, you know what's cooler than axe-throwing? Bee-throwing!

★★★★☆

FEATURED



Xen

FROM HALF-LIFE

Teeming with incredible local fauna, this exotic alien dimension makes for an unforgettable trip! Make sure to tip your floating space baby before you leave.

★★★★★



Hell

IN DOOM

Nowhere else will give you a better all-over tan than... you know what, I give up. This is actual Hell. It's horrible and you'll definitely die. I'm handing my notice in in the morning. I mean it this time.

★★★★☆

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